Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories - Reverse Rebirth - Riku's Story

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Character Introductions and Prologue: The Dark of Start

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Illustration: Amano Shiro
Translations: Goldpanner
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Kingdom Hearts Chain of Memories: [Reverse/Rebirth]Riku's Story

<<ЯR>>

Characters

Riku Replica

A Riku doll that Vexen created. He hates being called 'the fake', and his heart burns with rivalry towards 'the real thing', so he wants to defeat Riku, but…

Riku

A 15 year old boy who lived on Destiny Islands. He was best friends with Sora, and they were also great rivals. Once Ansem stole his body, taking advantage of the darkness in his heart. He and the King shut the Door to Darkness from the inside, in order to seal the darkness.

Sora

A 14 year old boy, chosen to be a Keyblade Hero. His personality is bright and simple, and his sense of justice is stronger than others. His journey with Donald and Goofy to see 'Kairi' and 'Riku' again continues. Checking out the upstairs

levels of Castle Oblivion, he was able to find his “most important thing”.

Naminé

A girl who holds the power to undo people’s memories and chain together other memories she drew herself. She tries to rewrite Sora and the other’s memories under orders from the “Organisation”.

Lexaeus

Number 5 of the “Organisation”. Along with Vexen and Zexion, he manages Castle Oblivion’s basement levels. He noticed Marluxia’s conspiracy right away.

Zexion

Number 6, who manages the basement levels of Castle Oblivion. He is like a leader to Lexaeus and Vexen. He’s cunning, the brain who works on plans in the background without doing anything directly.

Vexen

Number 4, and the oldest member of those at Castle Oblivion. He isn’t pleased about having to take orders from Marluxia, who is in charge of managing the whole castle.

Prologue: The Dark of Start

I had this… dream. Kairi giggling. Sora mad about something. And me—rolling around laughing beside them. Listening to the sound of waves from far away.

It’s those familiar islands, Destiny Islands. Those islands I went and threw away. Those familiar islands, my homeland.

“Riku!”

Sora called my name.

“Riku!”

Kairi called my name.

“Riku!”

Someone called my name—I’ll open my eyes now, slowly.

It wasn’t dark, but the place wasn’t filled with light either; he was in an indistinct place. Riku got up slowly, and shook his head quietly. *It’s like there’s mist deep inside my head.*

“I—what the hell… is this place….?” *I know I’m surrounded by some kind of dim light. Actually, it’s more like a haze than light, here in this weird space.*

“Sleep,” resounded a sudden deep voice from somewhere, and Riku stood up.

“Who’s there?!”

“Sleep just like this. In this, in the rift Between darkness and light.”

“Rift Between darkness and light….?” Riku muttered back, and closed his eyes. *I haven’t heard of a place like that before. All I’ve known up until now is darkness and light… I don’t really care about this place that’s not either.*

“Oh yeah, where is the King?!” Riku shouted. *After the two of us shut the Door to Darkness together, there was some wandering in the gloomy darkness. I’m absolutely sure I was with the King at that point. But—after that, he—?*

What happened to me?

“The king is far away. It’s okay if you leave the battle against the darkness to him, and continue to sleep. The light of awakening would be a thorn bringing pain to you as you are now. Turn your back to the light, and close your eyes.”

“You say that like I’m some demon from the dark.”

It’s true that I turned my eyes away from the light. No… to be correct, it wasn’t away from the light. I turned my eyes away from Sora.

Because Sora was dazzling…

And Sora became the Hero of Light, and I stained my flesh with darkness.

But, I'm not some demon from the dark.

"Do you want to know the truth?" the voice asked Riku.

The truth? …..Wonder what that's supposed to be. Does such a truth really exist, I wonder.

"If you are wrapped in the gentle darkness here, you will go back to sleep—for eternity."

Riku stared into the empty air in silence.

Like hell I'd ever do that…!, He yelled inside his heart, and that instant, the air quivered, and he almost thought the owner of the voice was smiling.

"So you want to know the truth—well then."

A card fell down from the empty air to land in front of Riku's feet.

"What's this…?"

"That's the door to truth. If you take it into your hands, your sleep will end, and you will begin walking towards the truth. However, that truth will be painful to you. Will you go, even so?"

Riku picked up the card, and his lips twisted into a slight smile. "Sleeping in a place like this would be boring." *This nothing-place—I can't be here, turning my eyes from the truth.*

"You won't be able to return to peaceful sleep."

"Couldn't ask for better."

"That answer is so very like you, Riku." Once again, the voice seemed to contain a smile.

At that moment, the world spun around and the scenery changed.

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Continue to Chapter 1: Recollect

Chapter 1: Recollect

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He was in a hall built of marble, which gave off a terribly cold atmosphere. Lifeless flower ornaments made from stone were decorating the place here and there, and Riku thought it was exactly like a grave.

All he carried was one card.

“This card is the door to truth, is it…,” Riku muttered, staring at the card as he stood alone in the middle of the empty hall. There was a picture of some sort of castle depicted on the card.

Riku’s footsteps echoed as he began to walked once more over the marble floor. There was no other sound.

Riku stilled his feet, and stared at a door that lay at the top of a few steps.

There’s something waiting for me behind that door, isn’t there?

Riku climbed the stairs quietly.

That truth will be painful to you.

If it is, I guess that pain is punishment for the things I’ve done.

The card began to glow and sparkle with light. And then, the door slowly let Riku in.

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What lay on the other side of the door was familiar. Rose objets d'art were here and there. Looking at them made Riku remember unpleasant events.

This is Hollow Bastion. The castle where the witch Maleficent lived. Also, the huge castle in which I spent time, steeped in darkness. When did I get here? While I was sleeping? The last place I remember before I lost consciousness was certainly this castle. My last memory is of standing blocking Ansem, trying to protect Kairi.

After that I walked alone in the darkness. I was with the King from sometime along the way—but I'm alone again now. If the truth is in this world, then maybe I can find it inside this castle.

"This is a world of your memories."

Riku looked up at the sound of the sudden echoing voice. It was the voice of the man who had given Riku the card just before.

"My memories?!"

"Your memories of the time you spent lured by Maleficent in this castle met with the card, and created this place. You have seen all this before, have you not?"

It was just as the man said.

This place is just as it is inside my memories—just as it was back then. This is where I swept Kairi away to, taken in by Maleficent's words, and spent time with her as she slept. The days I spent with Kairi… Kairi, like a silent doll… Even so, I was a little happy. I was able to have Kairi all to myself. But…

Riku turned his face up and yelled at the empty space. "What should I do here? Will I find out something in this castle? And am I going to be able to meet people?"

"I suppose you'd be able to meet with the people you have memories of… ordinarily," the unseeable man said slowly, then went silent.

"What do you mean, ordinarily?" The man was no longer answering Riku's questioning. "Hey! What do you mean!" Riku yelled again, and that moment, black darkness began to rise up in the surroundings.

“—What?!”

Those things appearing there are the monsters I once controlled—it’s a swarm of Heartless.

The Heartless all came at Riku at once.

“—Ngh!”

Riku assumed a stance without thinking, and in his hand appeared a blade wrapped in black light that looked as if it were fashioned after devil wings—the Soul Eater.

“I guess this means this is my blade.”

Riku swung the Soul Eater down, and destroyed a Heartless where it stood.

And I thought I had separated myself from the darkness…

The blade was familiar to his hand, as if this devil winged blade had always belonged to him. This left a bad taste in Riku’s mouth, and he ran into the middle of the swarm of Heartless, brandishing the Soul Eater.

Many Heartless fell to the Soul Eater and their bodies disappeared.

Riku ran up some stairs, Heartless appearing from the steps and from overhead, lunging at him.

“…What is this… what the hell!”

This is the first time I’ve fought Heartless like this. I used to control them, rather, like they were my comrades. But now they are enemies—if that’s true, then Maleficent… Hook…they’re enemies for sure now too. Anyone who makes use of the power of darkness is my enemy.

Those on my side are—Sora, Kairi… and the King. All of Sora’s comrades. Though, I don’t know if they’d think of me as someone they’d want standing by their side…

“…Get outta here, you!”

Riku swung the Soul Eater down, and ran towards a room he was sure would lie further up the stairs.

If I remember correctly, then this is—

“I wonder how it feels to visit your room after so long. The memories are rising into your mind now, aren’t they?”

The man’s voice resounded in the room, and Riku spun around.

A disgusting voice to go with these disgusting memories…

Riku frowned, answered in a low voice, “They’re not nice memories, unfortunately. I got this room from Maleficent, see.”

That’s right… Maleficent presented this room to me for my own use. Other than the time I spent aboard Hook’s ship when I went to get Kairi, I was in this castle. And, of all that time, I spent most of it in this room.

Swinging my blade—reading books—and if I had to say what else I did, I was just feeling irritated, thinking about things. Being angry about things.

I felt it was my fault that Kairi went into that state—but, then I’d wonder to myself if it wasn’t really a mistake to have left for outside worlds, and I would touch Kairi’s sleeping face gently.

“Seduced by the power of darkness, you lived in this room. You threw away your homeland, threw away your friends—threw away everything, and all you got was this tiny room.”

“Shut up!” Riku spat, and flew out of the room.

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Running out of the hall, Riku sent some Heartless flying, and climbed more stairs. At the top, he banged open a small door.

On the other side was the sight of Hollow Bastion’s gloomy dawn. The sea and land weren’t visible; only the sky went on and on.

Back then, Riku had been allowed to walk around the castle freely, and he had spent some time here at the top of this tower. It was a secret place where no one, not even Maleficent, came.

"…This place is just like I remember, too…," Riku muttered in a small voice, and sat down.

I threw everything away… Yeah, when I left the Islands, I threw everything away.

Back then, sitting here, I would tell that to myself over and over.

Cause that day—that stormy night—I lost to my greedy desire to be able go to outside worlds, and I submitted to the lure of darkness. If I could just see a world—if I could just get away from that same-old scenery, it would be fine. I didn't care how. And so, I threw away the Islands—Sora, and Kairi.

"I'm so stupid."

But, I wasn't able to throw them away. No—the truth is, even when I threw them away, Sora and Kairi didn't do the same to me. They didn't give up. That's why I wanted to save Kairi. Sora's innocent smile was frustrating, and I wanted to save Kairi before he did, no matter what it took.

The wind brushed through Riku's hair.

I wonder if I really will meet someone from my memories in this castle… I want to meet—Sora. More than Kairi, more than anything, I want to see Sora. I want to see him—and apologise.

Riku stood up and put his hand on the door.

I can't run away. I want to meet Sora with my head held high.

Riku stepped inside the castle once more.

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I go on and on, but all I meet are Heartless. No matter how far I go, I can't find Sora. Not only Sora—there's not even a sign of human presence in this castle.

There's only—the sign of that man.

"Hey! You're watching, aren't you! What's going on!" Riku yelled at the man. "Didn't you say I could meet my friends! Answer me!"

"—Do you really want to meet them?"

Riku stopped moving. "…Of course."

Of course I want to meet them. I want to meet Sora—meet Kairi.

"Didn't you throw them away?"

I did once. But…

"Trying to go to outside worlds, you passed through the Door to Darkness. You threw away your family, your friends, everything, and broke out of your homeland, in pursuit of the power of darkness."

"But, I threw away the darkness!"
Yeah. I threw away the darkness. I won't let it confuse me anymore. That's why—

"If so, did you gain anything back in exchange? You threw away your homeland as well as darkness. You've thrown away everything, and your heart is empty—like that room. And yes, your memories are empty too. That's why you won't be able to meet anyone. All that's left in your heart is the darkness you couldn't cut off and throw away."

The man's words reverberated in Riku's head like a spell.

"That's a lie! I threw away the darkness!"

I threw away darkness, that time. The King told me so. I got out from under Ansem's thumb.

"Did you really–? If so, you should continue on past here. The person you want to meet is waiting."

Riku looked up, and there was a large door at the end of his gaze.

That's the big hall Maleficent used to always hang around in…

Riku ran for the door.

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A huge church, decorated with stained glass.

There, she stood.

“I waited for you, Riku.”

“….Maleficent.”

Riku gripped the Soul Eater, facing her.

“Now now. What a way to greet me, when I think of you as my own son…,” said Maleficent, spreading both arms as she walked towards him.

“Don’t come near me—To think I have to meet you first, of all people,” Riku said, quietly.

“Of course! It’s because I’m the one who loves you more than anyone else. Here, let me see your face—”

Riku pushed Maleficent’s arms away and jumped backwards. “Stop messing around!”

Maleficent began to laugh as if something was unbearable funny. “Heh heh heh…”

“What’s so funny!”

“Your heart is stained with darkness. And so, you won’t be able to meet anyone but creatures of the darkness like myself. Doesn’t that make perfect sense?”

“…What…”

My heart is stained with darkness, so I can’t meet anyone but… people like Maleficent?

“It’s better than not being able to see anyone at all, right? Your heart is empty. If some darkness didn’t remain there, I don’t think you would have been able to see

even me.”

“I don’t remember hoping to see you.”

Really? Is that really true? Riku turned it over and over. *Who stood by me when I was depressed? When I saw Sora playing around with Donald and Goofy, the King’s attendants, in Traverse Town, who whispered to me so kindly?*

“Is that really true? Didn’t you once cling to me, seeking the power of darkness? You were hoping, in the depths of your heart. You wanted more of the power of darkness, you wanted to depend on darkness—just like that, see?” Maleficent whispered sweetly, and Riku bit his lip.

“Maybe I did hope for it back then. That’s why I opened my heart to the darkness. But, then I understood. You can’t depend on the power of darkness.” Riku took a deep breath, and looked straight at Maleficent. “I won’t depend on the darkness any more. If I’m only going to meet creatures of the darkness like you from now on, then I’ll defeat you all.”

Riku leapt at Maleficent, Soul Eater gripped in his hand. Maleficent blocked his swing with her staff.

“If you’re going to say such a thing, realise that in the end you’ll have to destroy yourself. Right now you’re a creature of the darkness just like me, too, you see.”

“So what! I depended on the darkness because my heart was weak—that ‘me’ makes me feel sick!” Riku jumped back to a suitable distance from Maleficent, then ran in again. “I do feel like I am my own enemy. So, when I see people like you drowning in darkness just like I did, it really gets under my skin!”

He brought the Soul Eater up, the tip of it grazing Maleficent’s chin.

“You hate the darkness, but it seems that fighting against it is all you can do.”

“I’m done talking, Maleficent,” Riku declared, breathing heavily. *From now on, there’s nothing more to say. From now on, I can’t let the darkness tempt me.*

“You’re letting me see the suffering of your heart as clearly as if you were spelling it out for me.”

“Shut up!”

Maleficent stepped aside, dodging his swing.

“Then, why don’t you let me end your suffering? With the magnificent power of darkness, yes!”

A dark aura began to emanate from Maleficent’s body; she changed into a dragon, and spat fire.

“—Tch!”

Riku made a huge leap backwards, out of the way. *How do I fight her? And from where?*

That instant—

Riku!

There’s a voice coming from somewhere. That voice is—

“Your majesty!?”

“There’s no time now! C’mon, do it now! Hurry!”

As the King’s voice said this, the ceiling began to crumble down.

“Your majesty! Where are you!”

“Come on already—hurry!”

In front of Riku, a pile of bricks from the ceiling had formed some little footholds.

“Got it!”

Riku climbed up the little footholds, and swung the Soul Eater down. Every time the dragon stomped some footholds crumbled, but even so, there was too much of a gap.

“I—won’t let the darkness in! From now on, and for forever!”

Riku's blow cut the dragon's head off.

"Gwaaaaaaaah!"

With a great roar, the dragon collapsed—and turned back into Maleficent.

"…Maleficent…"

Riku walked over to Maleficent and brought the Soul Eater up over his head, about to bring it down on her.

"Riku… You can never escape from the darkness…"

"Shut up! Don't say another word!"

The moment he went to bring the Soul Eater down, Maleficent's figure turned into light and disappeared. Riku stared at the light.

Maybe… Maleficent really did care about me? Maleficent was the only one in this castle who was there for me as my friend. For that one moment, I went and believed that she understood me. Maleficent was addicted to the power of darkness, and she ruined herself. That was the Maleficent who used me. I depended on her dark powers. But…

"…Your Majesty…"

The voice I heard before was the voice of the King. The King of all people might be able to give me the answers. The King of all people could…

Riku noticed that there was a door on the other side of the crumbled wall.

I have to move forwards. And then—I have to know the truth.

Riku ran towards the door.

<<ЯR>>

The air in the gloomy room was somehow damp. Not only was the room plagued with unpleasant air, but it felt like it might be permeated with creepy things. A blue-haired man stood quietly in the very centre of the room. The hair over his face was unusually long, covering most of his field of vision. He was frowning,

and it seemed as if he were waiting intently for something.

A man with cropped brown hair and a good physique appeared, and walked towards the blue-haired man.

"…You're not even going to offer a word of greeting? Lexaeus?"

"What's happened, Zexion? Please explain it to me," the brown-haired man called Lexaeus asked the blue-haired man, Zexion, pressingly.

Just then, another man appeared in the middle of the room. The man, who had long blond hair, had a terribly sickly complexion.

"You're skipping the greeting, too… it's deplorable. What happened to the unity of our Organisation, I wonder," Zexion declared without even looking at the blond man.

"You little–!"

"No, Vexen." Lexaeus held the blond man—Vexen—still with one hand.

Silence descended on those in the cramped, gloomy room, and Zexion sighed heavily.

Lexaeus was the one to break the silence. "Tell us, Zexion. What did you detect?"

"…It was a smell. At the very deepest layer of the earth, I detected two smells. One was that of Malefi…"

"That witch was swallowed by darkness. It would be impossible for her to return from the Realm of Darkness on her own," Vexen interrupted.

"Allow me to finish speaking. What I sensed was that of Maleficent, though it was actually the smell of an extremely close fake. Unfortunately, before I could look into it properly, the fake disappeared—brought down by the other one I detected." Zexion shrugged.

Right now, above ground, there is a serious plan unfolding. But…

“What is it?” asked Lexaeus.

“Well… I don’t really know,” Zexion answered quietly, and then spoke again. “But, his scent is incredibly close to that of our Superior. Close enough to be able to call them the same person.”

“Fool!” Vexen said, raising his voice.

There’s no way such a thing could be. To be similar to him…

“It’s the truth. So… what shall we do?” asked Zexion of the two. But, the answer was already there. They couldn’t just sit there enviously watching the plan of the members above-ground unfold.

“…Let’s watch over things, for now,” Lexaeus said, needlessly voicing their conclusion, and the three nodded.

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On the other side of the door was another chilly hall, just like the one at the entrance. Riku started walking towards the door he could see at the other end of the hall. It seemed Heartless weren’t appearing here for some reason.

It was definitely the King’s voice that I heard that time. But, I can’t see him. Maybe it was an illusion.

“Why do you refuse the darkness?”

That man’s voice echoed through the hall.

“You were watching, right? It’s exactly what I said to Maleficent.” *I’ll never be anyone’s tool again. I won’t borrow the power of darkness.*

“Darkness is your weapon. If you don’t accept it, it will be difficult for you.”

Riku stared silently into space.

“Stop fighting and accept the darkness—and then, become my limbs once more!”

Riku felt the air warp. That man was there—the man who had taken over Riku’s

body—*and treated me like an object*—Ansem.

“Of course it was you.”

“Huh—you don’t seem surprised.”

Riku stared fixedly at the face of the man in front of him, his expression not even changing. “You were always going on about the darkness. That’s how I could tell. Is your goal to drag me into the dark and control my body like before?”

Ansem slid closer to Riku. “How blunt. You’re definitely perfect for being my limbs. Now, once more, that body will—”

“Lay off it!! There will be no second time!” Riku leapt with the Soul Eater.

“How foolish…”

“Guh!?”

Ansem stopped the Soul Eater with his arm, and Riku was the one sent flying instead.

“Did you think you could defeat me? You, the weakling who couldn’t win against Sora even when you relied on the power of darkness?”

“Well excuse me… for being weak…”

Riku’s knees hit the floor.

“You’re weak, which is why you need the darkness. Give up. Prostrate yourself before me and the darkness.”

Ansem walked to the fallen Riku, and pulled him up by the arm.

“Who would… to something like darkness…”

Ansem brought his face close, and Riku averted his.

“There’s no longer anything that can be your power but darkness.”

Ansem threw him down, and Riku hit the ground with his face.

So I can't do anything if I don't borrow the power of darkness…

I lost to Sora. I lost to Ansem. There's no one here with me. There was only Maleficent and Heartless… nothing but beings of darkness.

Riku felt like he was going to cry.

I can't do anything if I don't borrow the power of darkness… that's…

That's not true!

A voice echoed from somewhere.

"—Your majesty?!"

A ball of brightly shining light floated around Riku and Ansem.

"Yup! Riku, you're not alone."

The King's voice and the light washed over Riku.

"I believe in you, Riku. The light won't abandon you, no way. Even if you're in the depths of darkness, the light will reach you!"

"…I understand." Riku stood up slowly. *I'm not alone. I have friends. I have the King.* "There's no way I'd lose to something like darkness."

And then he was gripping the Soul Eater, facing Ansem.

"You think a tiny light like that will stand up against my darkness!"

Ansem closed the distance between them in one rush.

"—Ack!"

Riku's Soul Eater stopped Ansem's descending arm.

"I won't lose to someone like you."

Riku hit with all his strength to try and send Ansem flying back. But, Ansem simply separated himself from Riku without even a flinch, and began to laugh.

“Heh heh heh…”

“What’s so funny!”

“Ha ha ha ha ha!” Ansem spread his arms out wide. “It seems that fighting against it is all you can do. I’ll help you see with your own eyes.”

Riku sidled forwards. “What do you mean?”

Ansem threw four cards at him. “These cards are made from your memories. If you travel the worlds born from these cards, I’m sure you’ll come to understand: that no matter how much you search for the light, you cannot run from the darkness—that there’s nothing left but for you to give in!”

“I never intended to run away to begin with. If I make it through all the worlds from these cards without giving in, then I win!”

“I have one more present for you,” said Ansem, as if he hadn’t paid any attention to Riku’s words. He snapped his fingers, and a dark aura surrounded Riku.

“What are you doing!” Riku tried to shake himself free, but it clung, wrapping around his body. *I feel sick inside my heart, like something is stirring in there. What the hell… is this?*

“I intensified the remaining darkness inside your heart just a little.”

“You still think I’m going to rely on the power of darkness now?”

“You’re the one who’ll decide whether you use it or not.” Ansem floated lazily up. “I’ll be waiting, Riku! For the time when you give in, and give your body over to the mercy of the power of darkness…”

“Wait!”

Riku went to chase after Ansem, but he disappeared right before his eyes.

“The power of darkness…” Riku stared at the palm of his hand.

The darkness he said was remaining inside my heart… Do I have to go around with this darkness in me forever?

“Something… smells…”

It felt as though the surrounding air had changed since Ansem left.

“This smell… the smell of darkness?”

It’s a lot like the smell I could detect coming from Maleficent, Hook and the Heartless—beings of darkness like that. Smelling like this… it’s just like I’m a tool of darkness.

“It’s okay, Riku.”

Riku looked up at the sound of the voice to find the King standing there.

“Your majesty!? You’re… blurry…”

The figure of the King before Riku’s eyes seemed about to fade any moment.

“My power can reach this place only weakly. So, I’m making sure my request reaches.”

Riku looked up and stared at the fading King. “A request from your majesty…?”

“Hey, Riku. You can’t go throwing yourself away just cause you smell of darkness. Fight the darkness inside. I know it will be a painful battle. But—please don’t forget. Even in the deepest darkness, there’s definitely light.”

“Light inside the darkness…”

“We saw it together, didn’t we? On the other side of the Door to Darkness, the gentle light in the far-off distance—the light of Kingdom Hearts—guided you. Please don’t give up, and believe. I’m wishing from the bottom of my heart.”

To not give up. To believe. But, with my body giving off such a strong smell of darkness…

“Riku.”

"…Okay. I'll give it a try."

I know I want to believe in the King's words. If the light of Kingdom Hearts shines on me too… If the light pours over not just Sora, but also me… maybe I can believe.

"I'll try to find a way to get to where you are, too. I'll definitely come. I promise."

The King thrust out a hand, and Riku tried to take it. But, his hand went right through.

"I can't touch you… is this an illusion…?"

"But, we shook hands firmly in our hearts. We're connected, you know."

"…I guess so." *But that's horribly fleeting… and a little lonely.*

"Well, I'll be off." The King disappeared with a smile on his face.

"So I'm alone again, am I…"

Riku gave a small sigh, and headed towards the door to the next floor.

<<ЯR>>

Continue to Chapter 2: Recall

Chapter 2: Recall

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Illustration: Amano Shiro
Translations: Goldpanner
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<<ЯR>>

On the other side of the door was a richly coloured world.

“This is… Monstro.”

Riku moved forwards, stepping over the strange squirming floor.

I met Sora here. Sora was just as—no, he was getting stronger than before. For some reason, I was a bit angry at myself about it.

“What are you doing,” came a sudden voice, and Riku took a defensive stance. The owner of the voice popped their face out from behind cover.

“…Pinocchio!”

Pinocchio came closer to Riku, grinning widely. “How do you know my name?”

A puppet with a heart, Pinocchio. Wanting to know the secret of that heart, I kidnapped him.

“How…? I wonder.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yeah, alone.”

Pinocchio stood in front of Riku, staring at him. “Oh, just like me then!”

The moment he said this, his nose began to grow.

“Ah!”

I definitely remember… his nose is supposed to grow when he lies. Which means Pinocchio isn’t alone. There’s a huge difference between him and me, the loner.

“Pinocchio, you’re not alone, are you.”

“Uh… no. I have a father. Don’t you?”

“I don’t have anyone.”*Yeah… I don’t.*

“Oh, okay. You’re alone—wahah!” Pinocchio’s nose started growing again.
“Don’t make me lie!” said Pinocchio, laughing as he held his nose.

You’re not alone.

Just then I felt as though I could hear the King’s voice coming from somewhere. But, no one’s here by my side. I’m always alone. I believe in the King, but—I’m so lonely.

“You’re not alone, are you,” Pinocchio laughed as he touched his nose, which had finally gone back to its normal length—and then he vanished.

“…Just like I thought, I am alone,” Riku muttered, and kept going forward.

Why am I alone, I wonder? Because my heart was stolen by the darkness? But, I won out against the darkness once. Isn’t that enough? Can’t I be forgiven? Isn’t that enough to let me see Kairi and Sora again?

I wonder how I can see them again. I wonder how the three of us can laugh together again. I don’t know. The one thing I can say for sure is that I have to move forwards. I have to make sure of the truth. If I do that, then I’m sure I’ll know what to do.

“…I’m okay on my own, aren’t I,” Riku murmured, and kicked at a soggy protuberance at his feet. The next moment the protuberance burst, and Heartless appeared.

“So you guys are here with me too, are you.”

Riku gripped the Soul Eater. A number of them came at him. Riku made a giant leap, and swung the Soul Eater down on one Heartless.

A Heartless that had once been under his control now spat out a heart, and disappeared into light.

If only there weren't Heartless—if only there weren't people who tried to use the Heartless—we would have left for the outside world on that small raft.

Riku began to remember what happened the night of the storm.

<<ЯR>>

The storm came, and I went out to the little island to make sure the raft wouldn't be washed away.

I ran through the rain, and when I was about to head to the cove, I noticed a huge door had appeared in front of the secret place. I wondered why there was a door in such a place—and just as I did, someone whispered to me.

"Don't you want to go to the outside world?"

I turned and found a man standing there in a brown robe.

"Soon the door will open. There's nothing to be afraid of. There's no reason to be afraid of even the darkness. Well now, go—Riku."

I didn't hesitate. I couldn't win against my desire to be able to go to the outside world.

"Riku!"

Kairi came running over to me. She must have come to the island just like me.

"….P…..cess"

"…What?"

The man's murmured words were drowned out by the sound of the waves, and I could hardly hear. But, now I know what that man said when he saw Kairi.

He said, Princess.

“Riku! The raft’s gonna wash away!”

“Kairi—there’s a way to get to the outside world without the raft!”

“Huh?”

Kairi looked at me with a strange expression.

“What about Sora?”

That’s right—Sora would be the first think Kairi worried about, every time. But, I was the same. As long as I was with Sora, I could go anywhere. That’s what I thought. And moreover, with Kairi there, who I supposed knew about other worlds… we could go anywhere, that’s what I thought.

“Sora and Kairi can come too, right?”

The man nodded silently at my question, and disappeared, as if swallowed by the door.

“Hey, Riku… just now…”

I couldn’t see Kairi’s expression very well in the rain.

“Kairi, wait here in front of the door. I’ll go get Sora!”

“Wait, Riku!”

I broke into a run, ignoring Kairi’s voice. It was because I had to go get Sora.

Sora! Sora! Sora! We can get outside of this world!

I knew he would have come to the island, worried about the raft. I found him right away.

“Riku! Isn’t Kairi with you?!”

Sora’s very first words were about Kairi.

"…The door has opened."

"Riku?"

Sora stopped walking, a weird expression on his face.

"The door has opened, Sora. We can go to the outside world!"

"What are you talking about! Kairi is more important than—!"

Sora was always on about Kairi. And Kairi was always on about Sora. But from now on, things would definitely be different.

"Kairi is coming too! If we go through the door, we might not be able to come back. You might not see your mum and dad again. But, if you're scared, nothing can happen. There's no reason to be afraid of the dark!"

I reached my hand out to Sora.

Come on, let's go—Sora!

"Riku—"

Face looking a little uneasy, Sora tried to grab my outstretched hand.

At that moment, I didn't even notice what was happening around me. I didn't even look. Sora, at the end of my outstretched hand, was so much more important than everything else.

Just a little more and my hand would reach.

"—Sora," *I called, and that instant, I realised that I was surrounded by darkness. Darkness wrapped around my body—but, there was no reason to be afraid of the dark!*

And then—I was wrapped up just like that—and my conscious faded into black—and the next instant, I was standing at Hollow Bastion.

<<ЯR>>

From that moment on, I was alone, thought Riku. *Why didn't I notice the*

darkness surrounding me?

I couldn't see anything else.

"Take that!"

Riku sent the Heartless in front of him flying with the Soul Eater.

What did I do wrong, I wonder—what made me have to be alone, I wonder.

Riku defeated Heartless as if trying to block his own consciousness.

<<ЯR>>

Castle Oblivion, Floor 1.

Sora stood in the hall.

"I really did have a feeling that the people we're looking for were here…," Donald muttered.

"You mean the King?" Goofy added, and Sora turned to look.

"It wasn't like they were definitely going to be. It was a hunch of mine, a hunch," said Donald, confidently.

Goofy's shoulders drooped. "Whaaat… But I sorta had that feeling, too."

"You too, Goofy? So did I," said Sora. *That weird feeling I had before coming into this castle—it must have been the premonition that we would be able to meet.*

"When I saw this castle, I felt it too. That our important friends… are here," said Sora, turning to look at a door that lay at the top of a stairway.

Maybe… No, definitely. We can definitely meet. I believe it. Riku is somewhere in this castle…

<<ЯR>>

In a gloomy dark room, Vexen was working on something. A doll lay before his

eyes. As he looked at the doll, which had no face or clothes, Vexen's mouth twisted into a smile.

"I know who it is," came a voice from behind, and Vexen spun around. Zexion was standing there. "It's Riku," Zexion informed him.

"What…? Oh, you're talking about the presence that appeared along with Maleficent's. I see. But, Riku should have vanished on the other side of the door to darkness along with the King. How did he escape?" Vexen asked. *Surely Riku vanished when he went to the darkness then.*

"His is a body that was once piled with darkness. Perhaps he is now half a dark existence himself," Zexion said, dispassionately.

"Maybe that's why you sensed the same smell as our leader. I see—Riku was given a mighty dark power, and it was that power that allowed him to pass through the realm of darkness. He's an interesting being, with connections to both the Keyblade and the power of darkness. I need to gather more data…," said Vexen. He turned back to the doll, and started some kind of work on it.

"We don't know why he appeared in this castle," said Zexion. Vexen, who had turned his back on him, turned around again and laughed.

"Heh heh heh… it's simple. It's a resonation with the other hero."

"Do you mean Sora?" said Zexion, voicing aloud the name of the other hero.

"Yes—A little while ago, Sora and his companions stepped into this castle. Now, that Marluxia is using Naminé's power to manipulate Sora's heart, all according to plan, I'm sure," Vexen said, sounding happy for some reason. Zexion listened quietly. "It seems that he doesn't want to hand Sora to us. But we can leave him to do what he likes. If Marluxia is to have Sora, then we will gain control of Riku. For you see, Riku is closest to our Superior!" he declared, and began to make adjustments to the doll in front of him.

Zexion stared at his back.

<<ЯR>>

I go on and on and there's nothing but Heartless.

“Why…”

Riku swung the Soul Eater, as if he were bashing the bad feelings inside his own heart.

Nothing but darkness remains in my heart, so the only things I can meet are Heartless, is that right? But Pinocchio was there. There has to be others too.

Here, Sora—I should have met you, too.

Many Heartless turned into light and disappeared.

I wonder where they go, when they disappear. Do they return to the Realm of Darkness? Will I go to the same place as them when I disappear?

Riku cleared all the Heartless away, and got his breathing under control.

Just then, a big round lump came falling down from above his head.

“Wha—!”

Riku jumped back, and gripped the Soul Eater.

It was a huge Heartless—Parasite Cage. It had a large round body with long arms that waved up and down. Its large mouth meshed jaggedly like a prison.

“Just when I’m in a bad mood—!”

Riku ran at the Parasite Cage. That instant, a black mist began to spout from around Riku’s body.

“Huh…?”

Riku stopped, and stared at his hand. It was wrapped in black darkness too—and then, his entire body was.

“…What is this?” he muttered, and the Parasite Cage hacked at him with an arm.

“Ugh—!”

But, Riku wasn’t thrown back. He was still standing, as if he’d absorbed the

attack. And then, Riku's body was covered by black clothing.

"This is…?"

The arm of the Parasite Cage was pushing with force, trying to move him, and Riku brought the Soul Eater down on it.

This destructive energy is so strong that even I feel it. And these clothes are the same as when I was melded to Ansem. In other words, that darkness is—

I intensified the remaining darkness inside your heart just a little.

Riku remembered Ansem's words.

"…So that means, the darkness in my heart makes me strong?"

Riku bit his lip and stared at the palm of his hand. The arm of the Parasite Cage attacked again. But—it didn't even graze Riku's body. And then, from above its head, Riku swung the Soul Eater down.

"Gyaaaaaaah!" screamed the Parasite Cage, turning into particles of light, and disappearing. Just as it had when the jet black clothing had stuck itself to Riku's body, the darkness slowly surrounded Riku, and then he went back to normal.

"The power of darkness…"

Power, speed, everything, it's all better than I am normally. Chills ran down Riku's spine. *Am I going to be swallowed by darkness just like this…? That reminds me, it feels like the smell of the darkness that surrounds me has gotten stronger, too.*

Riku clenched his fists, and went through a door that had appeared when the Parasite Cage vanished.

<<ЯR>>

On the other side of the door was another hall made of marble. But, unlike usual, there was a man standing there.

"Are you Riku?"

Riku stared at the man without even readying the Soul Eater. "…Who are you? One of Ansem's companions?"

The man, pale-faced and long-haired, was wearing something like a black robe. The hood looked familiar somehow. The only thing that Riku understood clearly was that the smell of darkness was coming off this man too.

"Ansem's companion—well now, you're half right. But, I'll just say that he's not the Ansem you know. He's Ansem, and he's not—in other words, Nobody."

The man walked slowly over to Riku.

"Nobody? Huh… I'm in a bad mood right now. Speak clearer."

"Perhaps they can be called beings that walk the twilight, belonging to neither darkness nor light?"

Don't belong to either—cannot belong. Just like me.

"Heh heh heh… Noticed, did you? Yes, exactly like you right now, existing in between darkness and light. I am also the same. In other words, we are alike, two peas in a pod."

"…Maybe," answered Riku, slowly readying the Soul Eater. He continued. "So what. You gonna say 'join me'? Like you said, the power of darkness remains in me. But the darkness is my enemy! And so are you, stinking of darkness like that."

"Hoh. You want to go, do you? Very well! I'll face you!" The man was suddenly gripping a large blue shield in his hand.

"That's what I want." Riku ran at the man—but, the man disappeared right in front of his eyes.

"What?!"

"Right here."

The blades on the shield grazed Riku from behind, wounding him.

“Uh…”

“You’re not even worth mentioning. Heh heh… now freeze!”

A string of hunks of ice attacked Riku from the front.

“…!”

Riku couldn’t avoid them.

“Are you that weak without the power of darkness?”

“…No!” Riku yelled at the man, on his knees.

“You should use the power of darkness—for you have the right to.”

“I hate the darkness! I won’t use its power!”

“Heh heh… That’s fine, too,” laughed the man, and suddenly he was right in Riku’s space.

“Ugh….!”

Riku used the Soul Eater to block the blow coming down, but barely.

“Feel the rage—and show me the dark power within you!”

“I—I…,” Riku said, in a tight voice, and then his body was wrapped in dark mist.

“Stop—”

“Heh heh…”

The man slid away.

“…That’s…” *It’s like the darkness is overflowing from my heart, as if I yielded to the feelings of rage—*

Riku found that he had changed once more, and he fell into despair.

“Now we’re equal—No, you can still use the power of darkness even more than this. Let’s go!”

The man moved right up to Riku, and swung his shield down. But, Riku swung the Soul Eater up, and sent the shield flying.

“Superb!” The man’s shield disappeared from where it lay on the floor. “The dark powers hidden within you are more powerful than I dreamed of—Deliberately making you angry was the answer.”
Riku glared at the man, unmoving. “…You mean you tricked me?”

“Thanks to your hot head, I was able to take some data that will be very useful to my research. I have to thank you, Riku.” That was all the man said before he disappeared, guffawing.

“—That son of a…”

Riku’s power drained from him, and his knees hit the floor.

“Why—”

Black clothing that could be mistaken for being dressed in darkness itself—and the light-bearing Soul Eater. Am I really left with no choice but to rely on the power of darkness…?

<<ЯR>>

“I remembered!”

Donald turned around at the sound of Sora’s yell. “What did you remember?”

“There was one more person,” said Sora, almost as if talking to himself.

“Huh? Where, where?” Goofy looked all around.

“No, no. I’m talking about the islands we lived on,” said Sora. He ran over to Donald and Goofy.

He must be talking about the little island where he and Riku and Kairi lived.

“Um… De… Des… something-something?”

“Destiny Islands! On the islands, there was Kairi and Riku and someone else, another little girl we were close to. The four of us played together a lot.”

Sora began to speak about what he had remembered—

<<ЯR>>

Continue to Chapter 3: Riku

Chapter 3: Riku

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<<ЯR>>

In the centre of a dusky room, Zexion stood motionless, arms folded.

Lexaeus appeared. He looked around the room, brows drawn, then drew nearer to Zexion. “What’s happened to Vexen?” he asked.

“He’s finishing the replica based on Riku’s data,” said Zexion, glancing at Lexaeus. *If he brings the replica to completion, then we too have a chance*.

“And how is Sora?” came the next in Lexaeus’ string of questions.

“They are inserting things into Sora’s memories using Naminé’s arts. If things continue unchecked, he’ll probably become Marluxia’s puppet. Larxene isn’t someone to be trusted, either.” *I know that Marluxia and Larxene are plotting something together. Also, there’s one more man in charge of upstairs Castle Oblivion—*

“And Axel. No one knows what that one is thinking,” said Lexaeus, sounding displeased.

“Let’s talk to Vexen after we’ve watched the situation for a little while,” said Zexion in a soft tone, finally looking at Lexaeus. *Vexen’s number is higher than ours. Our numbers aren’t directly related to our strength or position, but still, he’s simply been our senior ever since we met. And that is from our relationship when we were our real selves—when there were the names Even, Aeleus, and Ienzo.*

Perhaps that relationship is broken, or even unreasonable. Because as long as

that person is the first Organisation member, we are bound by the world.

“He hates Marluxia. It will get troublesome,” said Lexaeus, looking away from Zexion.

Zexion smiled slightly, and looked down. “And that’s why. Vexen can take care of the trouble instead of us.”

<<ЯR>>

The world on the other side of the door was familiar. Riku walked with slow steps over the slightly rolling deck. Before he knew it, the presence of darkness surrounding his body had lessened, and he’d returned to his original form.

“The power of darkness…,” murmured Riku, and he looked up. The moon drifted overhead. The sound of waves—he was on Captain Hook’s ship.

In that little cabin, he had spent the whole time watching Kairi’s face, which had been unmoving as if in sleep.

The moonlight shone on Riku’s hair, making it glow silver. The hair around his face blew in the ocean breeze. Riku slowly climbed the stairs from the deck to the bridge. From there, he could look out over everything.

“—Sora…,” Riku murmured. The name of a friend who shouldn’t be there.

At the end of his gaze lay no one.

Riku clenched his fists and closed his eyes. Sora’s figure floated before him. He was standing there, shouting up at Riku, who stood on the bridge.

I also—wanted to see you, Riku.

I wonder why I felt so unhappy hearing that, back then.

“Kairi—”

Riku turned and looked at the base of the mast. Kairi’s still sleeping form floated up, like a vision.

Without her heart—she wasn’t Kairi. That’s why I wanted to bring it back to her.

But—I wasn't able to. That's all I thought about, and then here, I controlled the Heartless and tried to kill Sora. There was no reason for Sora to have wanted to meet me, a person like that…

"Heh heh…," came a sudden laugh. Riku turned around.

"Who's there!?"

The shadow at his feet flickered and danced as it rose up to stand before him.

"Hahah—"

The shadow sliced at Riku.

"….urgh!" *That's right—here, I controlled Sora's shadow, and made it fight him. His own pitch-black shadow—*

What stood there looked just like his old, darkness-manipulating self. The moment he swung the Soul Eater down on the shadow, a dark aura surrounded Riku.

"Ahahahahahaha!" The shadow laughed at Riku, wrapped in darkness, and disappeared.

"So it's really—no good?"

Riku stared at his own hand, wrapped in darkness. The moon looked down at him.

<<ЯR>>

In the centre of a dusky room, he was watching a large crystal ball. In it, Riku could be seen staring at his own hand.

"What do you think? He's scared of the dark," Vexen whispered to him.

It was impossible to gauge his feelings from his facial expression.

"You're different. You know that, right? You aren't afraid of the dark." He nodded quietly at Vexen's words. "Go. Take in the power of darkness. And then, defeat him!"

He nodded at Vexen’s words once more, and left the room.

<<ЯR>>

Riku continued through the ship as it bobbed on the waves.

The only things that have been showing up are Heartless—And Heartless that I once controlled, at that. The illusions of Sora and Kairi that I saw on the bridge—the people I really want to meet—I can’t. Is there nothing but existences of darkness in the worlds in my memories? –Is that because I’m an existence of darkness?

That’s.

Riku cut down a Heartless with the Soul Eater.

It feels like every time I fight, the smell of darkness wrapped around my body gets stronger.

“Why—why?!”

The more I try to escape from darkness, the stronger the smell of darkness becomes.

Riku stood still in the little hold that faced the Captain’s cabin.

There’s no way Kairi will be happy if you’re hurting people, even if you get her heart back!

The words Sora had yelled in this room seemed to echo in Riku’s ears.

The retribution for those sins—? This is. This is the punishment for gaining the power of darkness to get back Kairi’s heart, is it?

I believe, Riku.

The light won’t abandon you, no way.

Even if you’re in the depths of darkness, the light will reach you!

Those words the King told me—right now, I just can’t believe in them. No one is

here by my side—not even the King. What can I do—to make the darkness disappear from my body?

Riku ran down the stairs, going back out onto the deck.

The night wind feels good. It feels good, like not having to think about anything. The breeze that comes from the ocean is a bit like the one at Destiny Island, it feels nice.

But—

“What’s wrong, brat. Where’s your usual pep,” a voice suddenly echoed.

Riku lifted his face at the sound. Standing there was Hook—Maleficent’s crony, and the captain of this ship.

“So you’ve finally showed up. I guess if I defeat you then I can leave this place?” Riku gripped the Soul Eater.

“Ho—You’d point your blade at a former mate?” Hook laughed.

That laugh is horribly dark compared to the Hook I remember.

“If you go on pointing your blade at all your friends, then in the end you’ll be all alone.”

“You’re not my friend!” spat Riku, and he leapt forwards.

Hook stopped the Soul Eater with his hook. “We were once mates though, weren’t we? You belong to the darkness, just like me.”

“You’re wrong!”

“Why would you tell such a lie?” Hook sent Riku flying.

“I’m not lying! I only joined you guys so I could save Kairi.”

“Your goal is of no consequence; you were one of us. Are you to betray your friends like that?”

“Shut up! Silence!” *Hook—and Maleficent, they were never supposed to be my*

friends. My only friends are Sora and the others!

“You should. You’ll strengthen the power of your darkness, doing things like that—Riku.”

“That’s not strengthening!” Riku stood up, and readied the Soul Eater once more.

“Then see your own form!”

At Hooks words, Riku looked around. *The smell of darkness is getting stronger again…!*

“No matter how far you go, you cannot escape the darkness,” said Hook, pursuing Riku with his sword.

“You’re wrong—!”

Perhaps trying to shake off the aura surrounding himself, Riku swing the Soul Eater about.

“Submit to the power of darkness, Riku!”

“Silence—!!”

Riku dealt a single blow, and Hook’s figure faded away.

“I don’t need the power of darkness…,” muttered Riku, energy drained, letting the Soul Eater drop.

Why… this… Even though I don’t want or need the power of darkness. Even though the darkness isn’t my friend. Bit by bit, I’m losing the ability to believe in myself. The true form I’m searching for… is this it? Without the power of darkness, am I unable to ever beat anyone? Do I have to give up, and let my body submit to the power of darkness?

Riku saw a small door in the corner of the deck.

I even feel like—I don’t want to know the truth.

The truth about myself—

Believe, Riku.

He could hear the King's voice from somewhere.

"Believe what?" Riku muttered at the King, who he couldn't see anywhere. I don't get it.

Even in the deepest darkness, there is definitely light.

Riku shook his head. "I don't understand…"

I even feel like, the more I fight the darkness inside me, the stronger it becomes…

It's scary.

I'm scared. I'm scared of myself. I'm scared of the darkness inside myself. I can't believe in myself.

Believe, Riku.

He heard the King's voice once more. *His voice is powerful, and kind… I still can't believe in myself right now, but I feel like I can believe if the King says so.*

"…I understand, your Majesty," Riku murmured, and then put one foot forwards.

<<ЯR>>

He was waiting for Riku in the marble hallway.

Certainly…

I was created by a nobody… so who on earth does that make me?

But, there's no need to harbour such questions. Dark memories occupied his heart. *Whether those memories are artificial, or perhaps whether they were originally inside me, I have no idea.*

The door opened.

Appearing there was a boy who had the exact same figure as his own.

“Wha—who are you?!”

“Surprised?” he answered, laughing.

Riku stared at the boy in front of him. “You…..”

“Of course you are. We have the same face, after all!” *If I were in his shoes, I’d be horribly surprised.* “I am a replica of you, created by Vexen,” he—the boy who had exactly the same shape as Riku—the Replica boasted.

“…So you’re a fake me.” Riku readied the Soul Eater.

“…Don’t be so presumptuous,” said the Replica in a tightly controlled voice, open displeasure on his face. “Feeling good, knowing you’re the real one? Our shape and power are exactly the same. There is one decisive difference, though. I’m not a coward, like you.”

The Replica pointed his own blade, exactly the same shape as the Soul Eater, at Riku.

“I’m… a coward?”

“You’re scared of the dark. You think the darkness inside you is oh-so-scary, you’re pathetic!”

The Replica understood what was inside Riku’s heart perfectly. *Fear—terror—of the power inside him.* The Replica, who had inherited his heart and power and everything from Riku, understood. But, the Replica did not know fear. *I have no need for fear. I am no one—If only I could become Riku. If I become Riku and use the power of darkness, I should be even better than the real thing.*

“I am different. I accept the darkness, and command the power of darkness freely.” *I was created to be alongside the power of darkness. That’s the meaning of my existence…* “And so—you can’t beat me!”

The Replica leapt. Thwack, and the huge shockwave travelled through the blade and reached the Replica’s body. It was the first touch he had ever felt—and, the proof that he was himself.

The Replica saw the light glimmering in Riku’s eyes. And then, he was thrown

back with huge force.

He's strong— We are supposed to have equal strength, but he is stronger. Does this mean I still don't have proper command over my power?

The Replica pushed himself to his knees, glaring at Riku.

Riku slowly walked over to the Replica. "Hey, Fake—didn't you say I couldn't beat you?" He pushed the tip of the Soul Eater into the Replica's throat.

"Huh—I was only just born. I'll get stronger and stronger from here. Even more than you, very soon. The next time we fight will be your last," said the Replica, standing up. *I shouldn't have lost—because I'm not afraid of the darkness.*

"You won't get another chance. I'll finish you here—!"

Riku swung his Soul Eater down, and the Replica swung his blade up.

"Wha—!"

Riku's body was thrown back. A dark aura began to spiral around the Replica.

The Replica laughed as he stood, looking down at Riku. "Hahaha! Feels great! Making darkness dance to my tune like this! How could you be scared of something this fun! You're so missing out!"

"Silence!"

"Huh—Is the coward playing at being tough, now. Later, Real Thing! Look forward to next time!" The Replica turned his back on Riku and ran away.

"Wait!"

<<ЯR>>

Riku was strong… Far stronger than me. But, I am him, and he is me… I had full confidence that if I commanded the power of darkness, I would be stronger than the Real Thing. Vexen told me so.

The Replica ran.

This is the first time I've ran since I was born. It feels nice. Everything does.

There is power in me—which means, I can gain the power of darkness. It's fun.

"What was your impression, fighting the real Riku?" came a sudden voice from behind, and the Replica stopped.

"…He's nothing but a coward. I'll finish him off soon enough," the Replica said quietly, back still turned on Vexen, mouth twisted into a smile.

"Before that, don't you want to meet the other hero?"

The other hero—I know his name. I remember it. The hero of light named Sora. "You mean that Sora guy? He's in this castle right now, isn't he. Do you want me to take care of him for you?"

"It should come to that soon, but nothing is decided as of yet. You're going to be very useful to me."

Vexen's voice makes me feel unpleasant, but I don't care right now. My power should be stronger than anyone else's. I want to test it out. "Leave it to me. The real Riku, Sora, I'll destroy them all."

Vexen put a hand on his shoulder. "Then, let's go—upstairs."

The Replica closed his eyes, feeling the atmosphere shift around him. *I'm strong—I can't lose.*

Whose voice do I hear echoing in my heart, I wonder. Is it my own? …Or is it Riku's?

"It seems that somehow, they've also come into contact with a hero of light," came Vexen's voice, and the Replica looked up to see a large door.

Looks like we warped from the basement to upstairs somehow. "What's behind that…?"

"The place where the underlings of our Organisation gather—You should show them your power, too."

"…Understood."

Vexen checked to see that the Replica nodded, then he opened the door.

<<ЯR>>

Riku ran down the hall, trying to chase the Replica.

I can't lose to that Fake… "Come out, Fake! Where are you!"

Despite the shouting, the Replica did not appear. Instead, a familiar voice echoed around the hall.

"Fake? I wonder if that's right." It was Ansem's voice.

Riku stopped and turned towards the direction of the voice. "What are you trying to say. That guy is just a fake. He said so himself."

Ansem stood in the centre of the floor. "Except on the other hand he could be called the form you originally should have become. He accepts the darkness. Yes, just as you once accepted the darkness that is me. Now, you're afraid of the darkness. Maybe you're the one who is faker."

"When was I afraid of the darkness?" Riku shot back, readying the Soul Eater. *I'm not afraid of the dark, not at all.*

"In the worlds made from the cards, you fought desperately against the darkness. Too desperately. Your desperation stemmed from fear of the darkness, did it not?"

I wasn't desperate—there's no way I'm afraid of the darkness, Riku said to himself. He said to Ansem, "Huh, I see what you're trying to do. You want to say, 'as long as you fight the darkness you're being afraid of it, so stop fighting,' don't you? I won't fall for something like that. My fight only continues."

"Stubborn, aren't you," Ansem said in a calm tone, and threw a card at Riku. "Then fight on, as you wish. You'll come to understand as you do. It is futile to go against the darkness." Ansem smirked, and disappeared.

"…What's so wrong… with going against the darkness…," Riku muttered, and

picked up the card that had fluttered to the floor. *If I continue to fight the darkness, I think my heart will break. The darkness that is inside myself… I still can't believe in myself. All I believe in is the King's words.*

I wonder what that Fake believes in, fighting…?

<<ЯR>>

On the other side of the door was two people dressed the same as Vexen, standing in front of the same kind of crystal ball that was in that room in the basement.

"How pitiful, to be driven into such a corner by someone of that level. You're a disgrace to the Organisation," spat Vexen, and a golden-haired woman—Larxene—looked down.

"Have you got some kind of business here, Vexen? I thought you were posted at the basement," said a red-haired man—Axel. The man didn't even look at Vexen, he just continued to stare at the crystal ball. Inside it, three humanoid shapes were visible. The memories inside the Replica told him that those were Sora and the others.

"I came to bestow you with my help. This hero you're all so enamoured with—I can't think he'll be of much use. To find out whether he's of true value or not… experimentation is necessary."

"Huh, that is so like you. After all, you need to experiment before you can ever be satisfied."

"That is the instinct of a scientist."

The Replica ignored whatever conversation Vexen and Larxene were having, and walked over to the crystal ball.

Axel's eyes flickered over at the Replica, and then he smiled slightly. "I don't really care either way. While testing Sora, you want to test your servant, don't you?"

The Replica's head shot up at Axel's words. *Servant—am I Vexen's servant?*

“He’s not my servant. Please refer to him as my research result,” spat Vexen.

“Don’t you mean, your toy?” Larxene interrupted.

I’m—a servant and a research result and a toy—I don’t care what people call me. But, once I’m stronger than the Real Thing, I wouldn’t mind simply destroying these guys.

“Huh, those who haven’t the capability to comprehend should keep their mouths closed.”

“Whatever. You came all the way here to see us. I’ll let you have a little fun. A present for my senior. If you use this, the show will get even more fun.” Axel smirked. “Use this card.” Axel threw a card to Vexen.

“Sharp-witted, aren’t you? Well now—let’s put you to use… come.”

At the sound of Vexen’s voice, the Replica walked over to the centre of the room. “Isn’t it just a card? What use will that be?”

“Memories of Sora and Riku’s homeland are locked within this card.”

The Replica stared at the card gripped in Vexen’s hand. *What does that mean…?*

“With that card and Naminé’s power, you can get the same memories as the real Riku. While we’re at it, we might even have you forget that you are a fake. In other words, we can remake your heart, make you exactly like the real Riku,” Larxene chatted fluidly, thrusting her face into the Replica’s.

“Wait a second! Remake my heart? Riku is a weakling, afraid of the darkness inside himself. I don’t need that heart of his!” the Replica shouted. *Even the few memories that remain weaken my heart. I don’t want or need Riku’s memories at all!*

Larxene turned to Vexen, ignoring the Replica’s shout. “How about it, Vexen? You wanted to test Sora’s true power using Riku, didn’t you?”

“It’s unavoidable.”

“What?! You’d betray me, Vexen!” the Replica yelled. *I want to stay as myself. I*

don’t want to share memories with Riku, it disgusts me.

“I thought I told you. ‘You’re going to be very useful to me’.”

“It’s okay, it probably won’t hurt all that much!”

“Don’t mess around!”

The Replica sliced at Larxene, but—he was the one sent flying instead.

“Silly~! There’s noooo way a mere fake could defeat me. But, you can rest easy. Naminé will erase the memory of me knocking you flat, too. She’ll plant the loveliest memories into you, into your heart. Even though they’ll be lies!”

Darkness wrapped around the Replica. “Stop…”

His consciousness began to slip into the embrace of darkness.

“Stop—!”

His scream—was swallowed by the darkness.

<<ЯR>>

Continue to Chapter 4: Replica

Chapter 4: Replica

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Illustration: Amano Shiro
Translations: Goldpanner
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<<ЯR>>

He was in black darkness.

It's pitch dark.

Where is this place?

I can't see a thing.

I can't hear a thing.

Who am I, again?

The boy looked at his own body.

Blue pants and a yellow shirt. Black gloves, and a black wristband.

My hair is—silver, looks like.

This is… me?

Something feels terribly out of place.

I wouldn't have thought this was me.

But—it's me.

The boy started walking. The entire surroundings were pitch-dark, and he wasn't really sure whether he was moving forwards at all. He just felt that he had to go

forwards, so the boy walked.

Soon, the door will open.

I heard a voice from somewhere just now.

“Who is it?!” the boy yelled. He found himself pressing against his throat.

Was my—voice really like that?

There’s nothing to be afraid of.

There’s no need to be afraid of even the darkness.

Now, go—Hero of Darkness.

I feel like I’ve heard that voice somewhere before. But, I can’t remember who it belongs to. No—I can’t remember a thing.

Suddenly, a huge burst of light spread out up ahead. The boy closed his eyes against the dazzle, and as he did so, a calm sound came flowing into his ears. *Is that the sound of waves?*

The boy slowly opened his eyelids, and spread before him was a blue ocean. The waves pulled gently in and out from the sandy shore. The waves were stopped by sand that was just as white.

There were two little boys and two little girls over there, talking about something with faces close together. The boy was right beside them, but they didn’t act like they noticed him.

The little brown-haired boy stood up, angrily. “You always have to be a stupid-head, Riku!” he said, and he ran away.

“Wait, Sora!” The little red-haired girl chased after him.

Looks like the brown-haired kid is called Sora.

Left behind were a little blonde girl, and a little silver-haired boy.

The silver-haired boy—looks just like me. Blue pants and yellow shirt. Black

gloves, and a black wristband. His hair is silver, just like mine—His eyes are blue.

The little silver-haired boy stood up, brushing the sand off his pants. “Naminé, aren’t you going to chase after Sora?” he asked the girl still sitting, who was called Naminé.

“If I chase after Sora, then you’ll be left all by yourself, won’t you Riku?” she replied in a small voice. She gripped a sketchbook and crayons in her hands.

“I don’t care if I’m all by myself.” The boy called Riku turned his back on Naminé just so.

“Sora has Kairi—and you have me, Riku.”

“Huh?” Riku turned back around. His cheeks were a little red.

Naminé laughed gently. “Hee hee… Riku, can I draw your face?” She placed the crayons beside her, and opened the sketchbook.

Just like that, she drew Riku’s smile on the previously pure-white page of the sketchbook, like magic. Then Riku and Naminé smiled together.

“Hey—you guys…,” the boy called to the two of them, and that instant—the world span round.

<<ЯR>>

The boy had been sleeping in a huge capsule. In front of him stood a man in a robe with a black hood pulled over his face. The boy slowly opened his eyes. The man noticed this, and pulled back his hood. From under it appeared long silver hair. The man’s skin was pallid.

<<ЯR>>

———-Conversion at 13%———-

<<ЯR>>

The three of them ran along the beach.

The three of us—Kairi and Sora, and me.

“Wait, Sora!” the boy yelled.

Kairi was chasing after Sora—and the boy was coming dead last.

Kairi turned to him. “Riku, hurry!” she shouted.

That’s the same name they called the silver-haired boy I saw on the beach.

Is—Riku my name? Then—was I that boy?

“She said hurry up! You’re slow, Riku!” Sora yelled from far ahead.

So I’m definitely—Riku, right?

His vision warped unnaturally, and the boy stopped. There was a horrible buzzing noise in his ears.

I can’t hear the sound of waves anymore. I’m hearing a weird sound—what is this sound?

His vision was painted grey—and the boy passed out again.

<<ЯR>>

The boy was in front of a small cave. *The annoying sound in my ears—it sounds like a loud groaning voice. No—I thought the sound I was hearing before was even worse than this…?*

“Shh! Quiet,” he said, turning to the boy following along behind him—*that’s Sora, I’m sure of it.* “Times like these call for a cool head—”

Why were we going into that hole, again? Oh yeah—It was definitely because Sora said there was a monster in there. So, the two of us came here for an adventure.

Back then, even something like that was a big adventure to us.

The blue sky peeped through a gaping hole in the roof of the cave.

“It’s the wind. You thought the sound of the wind was a monster.”

Sora crossed his arms behind his head and sighed exaggeratedly. “Whaaat, so that’s all it was… How lame.”

Just then, the wind gave another howl.

“Huh? What’s that over there?”

Sora broke into a run, as if he’d seen something deeper in the cave.

“A window… No, bigger…?” The boy followed casually after Sora.

“A door…?”

Indeed, it was a huge door.

I remember this door. I’m sure I’ve seen it somewhere before… Somewhere… Where was it?

The boy searched the door, but he couldn’t find a doorknob, or a keyhole.

“Looks like it won’t open,” the boy said, turning to Sora. Sora was kicking at the pebbles at his feet.

Sora’s one year younger than me, and sometimes I think he acts like a little kid, like now.

“Hey, Sora,” the boy called. “I’m going to get even stronger. And then one day, let’s leave this island together. Let’s have an adventure, not like this tiny one, but a real one.”

Sora looked at the boy, a smile rising on his face.

The wind gave another great howl.

The boy turned around.

The door began to shimmer with gold—the light reached out and enveloped the boy.

<<ЯR>>

It's crushing me.

Crushing my breath, my heart.

Why does it hurt so much?

He was in a dark and gloomy room. Despite being decorated luxuriously, the room was somehow lonely. The boy pressed a hand to his chest, suffering from the pain.

"Riku…"

The boy looked up. Standing there was a tall woman, wrapped in black clothes. In her hand she gripped a staff, and a cloak streamed behind her as she walked.

There's some kind of nasty smell coming from this woman.

"Rely too heavily on the power of darkness, and it will eat your heart up."

Take your own advice, he went to say, but the words caught in his throat. Why would I think something like that? What does this woman have to do with me? I'm Riku, aren't I? I don't know… I don't know anything.

<<ЯR>>

The boy was inside a huge capsule.

"Replica! Do you recognise me?"

The boy's eyelids slowly rose. Standing in front of him was a man with long silver hair, wearing a black robe. The smile pasted across his lips was cold, and the boy thought it was kind of creepy.

"You'll get strong… Because you'll gain the power of that hero of darkness."

The boy closed his eyes again.

<<ЯR>>

———-*Conversion at 35%*———-

<<ЯR>>

“When we get to another world, what will you do, Riku?” asked Kairi as she gazed out at the sunset. Sora was standing behind her. And, lying between the three of them was a little raft.

White sand… the sound of waves. This is that island.

The boy had already become aware that that name belonged to him.

Riku—that’s my name. But, something feels a little off.

“Will you be happy just seeing other worlds, like Sora?”

The boy thought about Kairi’s question for a bit. “Actually, I haven’t really thought about it. I just… I want to know why we are here. If there are other worlds, why do we have to be here?”

The boy narrowed his eyes against the glare of the setting sun.

“If there are other worlds, then this place would be like a little fragment of a bigger world. If it is a fragment… another fragment, not this place, shouldn’t have mattered, right?”

This tiny island on this tiny world. I wanted to try and see more places than this. I wanted to know why we were in a place like that.

“If we just sit around we’ll never know. Nothing will change unless we do something about it ourselves.”

The boy walked slowly over to the water.

“We can only see this same scenery. So… I want to do something.”

“Your head’s so full of thoughts, isn’t it, Riku?”

It is just my imagination, or does Kairi sound a little lonely?

“It’s thanks to you, Kairi. If you hadn’t come to this world, I don’t think I would

have thought anything of it.”

That’s right… I had a crush on Kairi, I’m sure of it. She was special. But Kairi… had a crush on Sora. I knew.

“Thank you, Kairi.”

That’s why… the truth was, that day, I wanted to tell Kairi how I felt. But, I couldn’t.

I can make her yours.

The boy spun around, hearing a whisper from somewhere.

“Who’s there?!”

Before he’d realised, the ocean had been stained pitch black.

What do you want to gain?

The voice felt like it was whispering right in the boy’s ear. The ground began to stain black, as if radiating from him. The darkness spread.

His whole body was swallowed into pure darkness.

I’ll fulfil your wish.

I don’t want you to fulfil it. I want to do it with my own hands. But, back then… I wanted Kairi for my own, no matter what.

I? No… Riku. Riku thought he wanted her for his own, no matter what.

The boy passed out in the darkness.

<<ЯR>>

This is the room I had in that castle. The witch Maleficent’s castle, Hollow Bastion.

“…Kairi… Sora…”

I decided that I'd do anything to get Kairi's heart back. Even if it meant staining my hands with darkness.

The boy got up out of bed, and left the room.

If I climbed those stairs, I could go out onto a little veranda at the top of the tower.

The boy liked looking out at the view from up there.

It felt like the wind was blowing through the gaping hole in my heart. Like I was the only person in the entire world, like…

The cold wind caressed his cheek.

<<ЯR>>

When he came to, the boy was standing on the beach.

In front of him, Sora was looking at Naminé's sketchbook.

"That looks nothing like me!"

Naminé looked at Sora, anxiously. A portrait of Sora had been drawn in the sketchbook. It seemed that Sora wasn't satisfied with it.

"I think it does," said the boy, looking at it. The picture was a close likeness to Sora's angry expression.

"I said it looks nothing like me! This?!"

Sora tried to grab the sketchbook off Naminé.

"Give it back, Sora!" Naminé yelled, and in that moment, with a great ripping sound, the sketchbook tore.

"…Sora?!" the boy yelled. Right between the two children's eyes, the sketchbook tore into pieces.

"…You're awful…," Naminé said as she crouched down to gather together the pieces of her torn sketchbook. But, Sora pushed Naminé over, and stomped on

the torn pieces.

“…Sora… I don’t… I never… want to see you again!” Naminé shouted, in tears.

Sora, I never want to see you again…!

Just then, he lost consciousness.

<<ЯR>>

“Really?” Larxene said in a condescending tone.

“Of course.” Vexen was typing something into a panel.

Beside then, Naminé was looking up at the sleeping boy inside the capsule.

“I’m sorry…”

But whether the tiny murmur reached the boy or not…

<<ЯR>>

———-*Conversion at 43%*———-

<<ЯR>>

The boy was in a hall made of marble. It seemed somehow like a room that was part of a huge castle.

The boy looked around himself. “Where am I…?”

I don’t remember this place.

A door opened, and he felt the presence of someone running up to him.

“Riku! If it isn’t Riku!”

The owner of that voice is—Sora. And my name is Riku.

Feeling his heart answer to that name, the boy stared at Sora.

Running at him as if he would grab him for a hug any moment, he stopped right in front of the boy.

My memories feel horribly vague for some reason, thought the boy. Why… am I here?

“So you’re here too!”

“’Too’? You say that like looking for me was something on the side,” were the words that slid from the boy’s mouth, and he snorted at Sora even as he felt uneasy. *We were… separated, yes. And we… looked for each other… I think. And now, we’re looking for Naminé. That’s definitely the summary… Summary?*

Even as he questioned doubtfully the word ‘summary’ that had floated up inside his head, the boy glared at Sora.

Sora dropped his eyes. “…That’s not what I meant…”

“Huh, don’t make excuses. The truth is, you forgot about me, didn’t you?” Even as he spoke, the boy couldn’t hide the irritation he felt about his own memories.

“No way! I came all this way looking for you!”

“But not anymore. Right now, you just want to meet Naminé. You didn’t care what was happening to me anymore, did you?”

“You’re wrong!” Sora yelled.

Sora never thinks of anything but Naminé. Me neither… But, you have Kairi. So why can’t you let me have Naminé!

“Huh… Sora, have you even thought about Naminé’s feelings?”

Sora stopped moving in surprise. “Naminé’s… feelings?”

“Huh, just as I thought. You didn’t think about it at all. You want to see Naminé. But there’s no guarantee that Naminé feels the same way. Didn’t think about that, did you?”

“You mean…”

I really don't think Naminé wants to see you. Not after what you did.

"Naminé doesn't even want to see your face."

"Why?!"

The boy know that Sora was losing his memory. *But… even so, forgetting this is going too far. Important things… important memories. Sora's just forgetting everything. Even his memories of being with me.*

But, the boy had no idea how he knew that Sora was losing his memories. That connected directly to his worries about himself.

I hate Sora. Naminé doesn't want to see Sora either.

That was the only true thing the boy had confirmed inside himself.

"Listen to your memories, and you'll know why. Why did Naminé disappear from the islands? If you remember that, you'll understand."

"Did I… do something? Was it because of that? Riku…"

"Go home, Sora. I'll protect Naminé. Anyone who gets near her… is my enemy!"

The boy readied his blade against Sora. Darkness encircled them—the boy felt power flood through his body.

"W-what are you thinking! But we finally found each other!"

"Well, Sora. You didn't think about my feelings, either. Naminé's not the only one who doesn't want to see your face again. Neither do I," the boy shot, and leapt.

Why don't I want to see Sora? Why am I so angry?

The boy swung his blade down, doubt after doubt floating up inside his heart.

"Riku, stop!" Sora was barely able to block the boy's attack with his Keyblade. He made a sound.

“Got a little stronger, have you?”

In the boy’s memories, Sora had always lost their matches.

“You don’t want to see my face again… Why would you say that!”

“Huh… I didn’t say it all this time, that’s all. I’ve always hated you,” the boy spat, then hesitated.

Always…?

Have I really always hated Sora? I don’t know. I can’t remember.

“If you’re serious, Riku… I’m not holding back on you…!”

Sora swung the Keyblade down.

“Ugh…!”

I was barely able to block that. His power is strong. It’s the power of the real thing.

“Maybe, Riku… you’re the one who got a little weaker?”

The slight smile showing on Sora’s face… It’s the best smile turned at people you’re close to. The boy jolted. *I don’t understand how Sora can have that expression. I don’t understand. I’m sad. I’m angry at myself. It hurts.*

Inside the boy, his memories were clouded.

“…Riku!”

Sora went to follow after, but the boy pushed him aside, and ran away.

I don’t understand… The boy was terrified of the things he didn’t understand. *I have to get out of here. I want to go somewhere far away from here. Somewhere —far.*

<<ЯR>>

Larxene and Vexen stood around the boy, who had collapsed in the hallway.

“Ah-ah-ah. I told you it was still too early. You’re rushing it, Vexen,” said Larxene, giving the boy’s ribs a light kick.

“Didn’t this happen because you said that Sora was already coming to the floor?”

Vexen scooped the boy up, and turned his back on Larxene.

“Whatcha doing?” Larxene asked uninterestedly, arms folded.

“The rewriting of his memories is still only halfway through… If the spiral of his memories collapses halfway though, the Replica will collapse. Right, Naminé?”

“Yes…,” Naminé replied in a small voice, looking at the boy’s sheet-white face.

“Then you should complete his memories and make him fight the hero,” said Vexen, and Naminé started walking obediently.

Please, stop already…

Naminé thought she heard a small voice, and she turned.

“…Replica…?”

“What is it, Naminé?” said Vexen.

Naminé closed her eyes for a moment, then followed after.

<<ЯR>>

Continue to [Chapter 5: Rival]

Chapter 5: Rival

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Illustration: Amano Shiro
Translations: Goldpanner
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<<ЯR>>

Riku ran.

As he did, he realised he remembered the town he was running through was familiar. He'd come here just once with Maleficent.

Traverse Town. A town of meetings—he'd met Sora again here in this town. It was a lively town, always full of people.

Riku stopped, staring at a small window from which light poured out.

Here, that time—I saw Sora smiling. Sora, laughing with his new companions—I don't really want to remember it.

But, Riku's heart held nothing but regret.

That time, why did I…

<<ЯR>>

The boy stood in front of a little house made of brick. The area around the house was dim, and light poured from the window.

Inside was Sora.

The boy stared at the scene.

"Behold. Just as I said, no? You were getting desperate searching for him, but he certainly didn't miss the opportunity to simply find new friends," came a

woman’s—Maleficent’s—voice from behind.

I couldn’t move, just staring at the scene in the little window. I could see Sora smiling with his companions. Sora smiling, even though he hadn’t found Kairi. Sora smiling with people other than us. But, I was angry—I was lonely—I was sad—

“You see, that child’s new friends are more important to him than you are.”

Really? Maybe that was true. Maybe Sora had already forgotten about me. To Sora, I was—I? I was—who was I, again?

“However, there’s nothing to worry about. Forget about that child, and come with me. I’ll find what you desire—Riku.”

That’s right. I’m Riku. I’m Sora and Kairi’s friend, and—no… there was someone else, one other friend. Who was it, again? I can’t remember…

The dimness slowly deepened blacker and blacker—and the boy was wrapped in darkness.

<<ЯR>>

Naminé sat on the beach, drawing a picture. The boy, Sora and Kairi smiled out from her sketchbook.

“You’re not in here, Naminé?” the boy said, peering into the sketchbook.

“I’m—I can’t see my own face, you see.”

“Oh.”

The boy thought that was rather lonely. *It must have been because she couldn’t actually see herself smiling alongside us, but I guess that couldn’t be helped.*

“Well then, how about I draw you?”

“Huh?”

The boy took Naminé’s crayon into his hand and started to draw.

Naminé and my own smiling faces. We were always laughing together. We were happy—the two of us.

“There we go, how’s this?”

The boy showed Naminé the sketchbook, where he’d drawn both of their smiling faces. It wasn’t as good as Naminé’s picture, but Naminé smiled gently.

“Thanks, Riku.”

The sound of waves is gentle, thought the boy, and in that brief moment a roar resounded.

“Huh…?”

The boy turned, and the ground under his feet suddenly changed from a beach to a cliff—and a huge beast was leaping at him.

The boy dodged desperately, and cut out at the beast with the blade in his hand. The beast gave a great cry and collapsed.

“Stop, Riku!”

Sora’s shout echoed around them.

The boy slowly turned.

“Sora, you’re late. I was waiting for you. We’ve always competed over one thing or another. You over things that belong to me, me over things that belong to you. We’ve always been rivals,” the boy said casually, looking down at Sora.

That’s right—we’ve always fought over things with each other. Fought to take things from each other.

“What are you trying to say, Riku?”

Sora’s words made the boy smile a little, and—he wished.

I’m strong. I protect—Naminé and Kairi. I protect this world.

“The Keyblade will tell us. Who the true hero is!”

The boy thrust out his right hand. In that instant, Sora's Keyblade vibrated as if being pulled by a great force, and it turned into light and disappeared. And then, the boy was gripping the shining Keyblade in his own right hand.

"You can't save Kairi. Only the true hero, who can open the secret door and change the world, can wield the Keyblade."

The boy thrust the Keyblade towards the sky. In that instant, darkness spread from the centre of the Keyblade, and the world span.

<<ЯR>>

The boy ran, out of breath, questioning himself.

The Keyblade that should have been mine went back to Sora again. Does that mean I'm weaker than Sora? Or, was there another reason? We've always been rivals. I always won. Apart from that—apart from Kairi. I guess I'm no match for Sora after all—

"Those possessing truly strong hearts can have the Keyblade," a quiet voice said to the boy's back.

"Who's there?!"

He span around to find a man in a black hood standing there.

"If you do not strengthen your heart, then the Keyblade will not choose you."

"Are you saying my heart is weaker than his!"

"In that instant, it was."

The boy looked down, mortified, and the hooded man moved closer to him.

"However, people can get stronger. You, who has travelled deep into the door, unafraid of darkness—you are brave. If you're brave enough to charge into even deeper darkness—then your heart will get stronger."

The boy shook his head slowly. "What do I have to do—"

"Open your heart to the darkness. That's all you have to do." The man slowly

extended his hand towards the boy, and his body was wrapped in darkness. “Your very heart will become darkness, swallowing everything—”

With the man’s words, the boy felt power inside his body. Power that wouldn’t lose to anyone. The power of darkness.

With the power of darkness—I can’t lose to anyone.

The boy—broke into a run.

<<ЯR>>

The boy was inside the darkness again.

There’s nothing—just pitch darkness. I don’t know which way to go. Darkness that seems like it could swallow existences, voices, hearts, everything.

I’ve been here before…?

The boy tilted his head.

“Riku!”

He heard a voice shouting.

That’s right… My name is Riku…

“Riku!”

The boy listened to the voice in the dark.

Who does that voice belong to, again?

He opened his eyes a crack, and sunlight burst in at him.

So bright…

“Riku!”

Suddenly, Naminé’s face appeared right in front of him.

“Wagh!”

The boy sat up in surprise.

“Don’t scare me like that, Naminé.”

“You were the one who scared me, Riku,” said Naminé. She looked a little sad. “Because, it looked like you were in pain.”

“I was dreaming—some pitch black thing was giving me strength…”

“You’ll definitely get stronger, Riku,” said Naminé, but she still looked sad.

“Sora will get stronger too,” said the boy, but Naminé shook her head.

“No… You’ll definitely be the strongest, Riku. Besides, Sora is… Hey, Riku?”

“What.” The boy stood up, brushing sand off his pants.

“I… The thing about Sora is… Well, what if I were to say that because of Sora, I’d have to leave these islands…”

“What are you saying, Naminé? There’s no way anything like that would happen,” said the boy, smiling. *There’s no way. We’ve always lived happily on these little islands.*

“No… I…”

Bit by bit, Naminé’s figure started getting hazier.

“Hey, Naminé?!”

“…I’m sorry, Riku… No… Re… pli…”

“Naminé?!” the boy shouted.

But, the boy’s consciousness was wrapped in darkness once more.

<<ЯR>>

Naminé stood in front of a huge machine.

There's not much left to go. Just a few more memories to tinker with—but.

The instant her hand went to touch the panel a voice called out from behind, and Naminé's shoulders trembled.

"What are you up to? Naminé. You weren't about to tamper with the fake's memories as you pleased, were you?" Naminé turned slowly, and the owner of the voice was confirmed. Larxene stood there, a thin smile playing on her lips. "Cat got your tongue?"

Turning her back on Larxene, Naminé looked at the boy's face, displayed on the monitor.

<<ЯR>>

———-Conversion at 87%———-

<<ЯR>>

"Do your best, both of you!" Kairi yelled.

That moment, a huge impact shook his wooden sword.

The boy stopped Sora's attack, and grinned.

"Is that all you got," the boy yelled, and sent Sora flying back. Sora tumbled over the sand, and the boy pointed his wooden sword at Sora's throat.

Sora heaved a sigh and threw both hands up. "…I lost."

"You have a long way to go, Sora," said the boy, laughing as he grabbed Sora's hand and pulled.

Sora laughed, borrowing the boy's help to stand up. "I won't lose next time!"

The boy answered Sora with a grin, and threw his wooden sword onto the sand.

He thought of it as a wooden sword, but really it was just a stick that had washed up on the beach. They had never held real swords.

"Ooh-aah, Riku is so strong~," said Selphie, running over from where she'd

been watching the sword fight.

Tidus picked the stick up off the sand. “Me next!”

Sora readied the wooden sword he still held. “Aw yeah! I’m gonna win this one!”

The boy watched over the situation, feeling incredibly happy and at peace.

<<ЯR>>

The boy stood in darkness that went on and on.

“Again…”

I don’t know how many times I’ve stood here in this darkness.

It was this darkness that always left a deep impression amongst the rest of his hazy memories. In them, Kairi and Sora and Naminé also surfaced and faded.

Soon you will awaken.

Hearing a voice coming from somewhere, the boy looked around.

What is your name?

“My name is… Riku,” the boy answered to the voice in the dark, and he saw a light up ahead.

So now, go and close the door.

“What do you mean?”

Go, and you’ll see.

Obeying the voice, the boy ran towards the light up ahead.

The light was actually shining out from a huge door. And there stood himself, trying desperately to close the door.

“That means…,” the boy said aloud, and in that moment, his vision warped.

"…Huh?"

When he came to, he found himself pushing desperately at the huge door.

Did I replace him…? No, that's not it… I am him. He was me.

"Take care of Kairi for me, Sora," the boy said, facing the other side of the door. On the other side of the door, Sora nodded.

It will be fine, leaving Sora to take care of Kairi… And I will protect Naminé.

The door slowly swung shut, and the instant it closed a thunderous sound echoed out.

It began to crumble, under his feet—and then, a rain of light was pouring all around. Countless shooting stars were hurtling across the sky. The boy looked up at them, vaguely.

These shooting stars are…

"I'm scared… Riku."

He was on the little pier on the island. Naminé and the boy looked up at the shooting stars together.

There were countless shooting stars in the sky. Like a flood of light, so many stars were falling that the boy couldn't count them all.

"This here…," the boy began, about to tell Naminé how unusual it was, but he held his tongue when he saw how frightened she was.

"I'm scared…"

Was I dreaming? "It's okay—I'll protect you," he told her.

"Really? But what will you do, if a star falls on the island?"

"If stars fall down here, I'll send them all flying back," the boy said, grinning at Naminé.

"…Promise me," Naminé said in a small voice.

“I promise,” the boy replied, clear and determined.

Finally, Naminé smiled—and held out a little star-shaped pendant.

“This… charm seals the promise.”

It was a pendant made from paopu fruit.

“They say that a pair of lovers who carry this fruit will never ever be separated.”

The boy took the pendant, and tilted his head. “You mean…”

“It means even if something happens, someday we’ll be reunited,” Naminé said, and she smiled—her smiling face went blurry.

<<ЯR>>

The sound of waves was gentle in the boy’s ears. As he watched the sun set from the little island, he thought to himself.

I wonder where the girl who shares a name with these waves is right now—and what is she doing?

The boy stared at the charm he’d received from the girl.

“Hey, Riku. What have you got there?” Sora popped up, peering into the boy’s hand. “Ah! A paopu fruit!”

The boy put the charm away, hiding it from Sora, and looked back out over the ocean.

“Hey, hey, what is it?”

“…What’s it matter.”

For some reason, Sora doesn’t remember Naminé. I guess—she disappeared right after he ripped her sketchbook, so… he wanted to forget the awful thing he did, thought the boy.

The more I think of Naminé—the more I hate Sora’s brightness.

“Show it to me!”

“Leave it, okay?”

Sora groped at the boy, finding and taking the charm.

“Huh? It’s been made into a pendant?”

“Give it back.”

“Who gave it to you?” Sora teased, holding the charm away from the boy.

“I said leave it!!” the boy shouted, and in that instant, Sora and the charm both tumbled to the ground. The boy snatched the charm up and glared at Sora.

“…Learn the difference between what’s okay and what’s not okay, Sora.”

“What? You’re not allowed to keep secrets, right? Just cause some girl gave it to you?”

I hate how Sora tramples on my heart unaware. It doesn’t mean I hate Sora himself—but to me, who will never be as gentle and honest as he is, I get jealous, I can’t stand it…

Surrounded by sunset, the boy stared at the charm.

<<ЯR>>

———-*Conversion at 100%*———-

<<ЯR>>

In the palm of his hand was a charm made from yellow paopu fruit.

The boy—the Replica recovered consciousness. He was standing in a room made of marble.

“Where is this place…?”

He had a strange feeling that something was off.

“What’s wrong, Naminé?”

Hearing that name, the Replica looked up.

Naminé… oh yeah, that’s right.

“What are you agonising over, with that awfully gloomy face you’re pulling there. Regretting the tinkering you did to Sora’s memories? Or maybe—”

The boy planted himself in front of Larxene, cutting her off. “Cut it out, Larxene. Naminé doesn’t want to remember Sora anymore.”

Larxene shrugged. “Ohhh really.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make all your pain go away, Naminé—I swear it on this charm you gave me all that time ago.”

Naminé just looked at the Replica with a sad expression.

“Later,” said the Replica, turning his back on Naminé and leaving the room.

<<ЯR>>

A marble hall. Already used to this view.

The Replica continued to wait for Sora.

I have to defeat Sora—right here, right now. That thought was the only thing occupying the Replica’s heart.

Hearing quiet footsteps, the Replica looked over and said, “Persistent, aren’t you, Sora. How about you hurry up and go back.”

Sora stopped walking, and grinned. “I’m not going home until I’ve saved both you and Naminé.”

“I don’t remember asking you to save me,” said the Replica, readying his blade. *Yeah—there’s no way he needs to save me. Because, Naminé and I are together here in Castle Oblivion…*

“Kairi’s waiting for you to come home, Riku!” yelled one of the King’s

attendants—Goofy—from behind Sora.

“Kairi…,” the Replica murmured. Kairi’s existence was terribly vague inside the Replica’s memories. *But that’s because I have Naminé.*

“That’s right. Kairi is waiting for you to come home,” said Sora.

The Replica snorted. “Did you forget? I thought I told you when we shut the door to Kingdom Hearts. I said ‘take care of Kairi’. I’m not going back to those islands again. I’ve made up my mind.”

“Kairi’s not the only one!” Sora continued, desperately. “You have so many friends that—”

So many friends—maybe I did, didn’t I. But, just like Kairi, I don’t really remember them very well.

“I’ve already forgotten about that bunch of losers,” he answered.

“What!” Sora yelled.

“What about you, Sora? Do you remember every face of the island gang?”

“What are you saying, of course I…”

Sora faltered. The Replica felt a little relieved to know that Sora was losing memories too.

That’s right… It’s this castle’s fault that my memories are so hazy…

“Don’t worry about it. It happens to everyone who spends time in this castle. You start forgetting the things that don’t matter, so you can remember the things that are truly special. I remembered, Sora. I now know what’s most important to me,” the Replica shot, laughing.

“What do you mean, things that don’t matter—”

“I protect Naminé in this place,” the Replica interrupted. “Nothing else matters.”

Sora stared at him, and then smiled for some reason. “Hey, Riku… Maybe fighting will make you remember?” he said, readying his Keyblade.

“How about we test it out?” The Replica casually readied his own blade.

“Donald! Goofy!” Sora shouted.

“Wak, we know!”

The King’s attendants ran for the wall.

“Getting the obstacles out of the way, are we!”

“This fight is between the two of us!” said Sora, and he leapt.

The Replica made a sharp sound, stopping Sora’s blow. His hand went numb from the strength of the impact.

“Remember, Riku! We fought all the time at the beach—just like this!”

“…Huh. If we’re talking about you always losing then yeah, I remember!” the Replica replied, knocking the Keyblade aside and swinging his own blade down.

“Then—you should be able to remember more than that!” Sora yelled.

Their attacks clashed over and over, until they were both out of breath.

“Remember, Riku!”

Sora’s attack landed with a huge thud and the Replica’s blade went wheeling through the air.

The Replica fell to his knees. “Dammit…”

“Riku…”

“Even fighting with you didn’t make me remember a single thing. Do you want to try fighting a little more?” yelled the Replica, getting up on shaky legs.

But, Sora just quietly held out a hand to the Replica.

“Hey, Riku. If you have time to fight, then let’s save Naminé together!”

“Together… you say?” The Replica waved Sora’s hand off. “How like you.

You’re always pushing your way into my heart like this!”

“What do you mean?”

You’ve forgotten Naminé, and I won’t forget what you did that day.

“Huh. Of course you’ve forgotten. It didn’t matter to you, did it!”

And then, the Replica turned his back on Sora, tore up the stairs, and ran through the door.

My memories with Naminé—and the charm. But, why do I hate Sora so much? Why… why?

<<ЯR>>

Naminé watched the two boys through a large crystal ball, her sketchbook clasped tightly to her chest.

Axel walked causally up to her. “The heart goes out to him, doesn’t it?”

Naminé lifted her face, and looked at Axel.

“Stop that. We nobodies can never be somebody.”

Naminé cast her eyes down again, gaze dropping to her knees.

Everything that’s happened is my fault—my doing.

“Hey Naminé—there isn’t anything else you can do, is there?” Axel said, almost in a whisper.

Naminé’s eyes stayed down, and she didn’t move.

<<ЯR>>

Continue to Chapter 6: Relent

Chapter 6: Relent

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<<ЯR>>

In front of the Replica, who had lost to Sora and escaped, appeared a red-haired man—Axel. "Hey—Fake… no, Riku."

"What do you want," asked the Replica, panting heavily and glaring at Axel.

"The Hero was strong, wasn't he?" smirked Axel, moving closer to the Replica. "Naminé says that strong's her type, too."

The Replica was silent. He looked down, biting his lip. *What went wrong, I wonder. Why do I hate Sora so much, I wonder.* The Replica was still lost inside his vague memories.

"What do you think, Riku? Do you want to try getting even stronger?"

"What do you mean."

Axel threw a card at the Replica. "If you use this card, you can get even stronger. How's that sound?"

"Why are you helping me," asked the Replica, staring at the card on the floor. It was pitch black with nothing on it at all.

"Cause I wanna see the Hero defeated too, see."

There's some hidden side to Axel's words, the Replica thought intuitively. *But, I don't have enough power to win against Sora the way I am now. That fact doesn't change.*

"Well, let's go—Riku." The Replica picked up the card and headed for the door he could see ahead. "Yeah—Hold the card up to the door. Then, you can get even stronger."

Tempted by Axel's words, the Replica held the card up to the door. Watching him from behind, Axel broke into a grin, and disappeared.

<<ЯR>>

After crossing through Traverse Town, the town of meetings, Riku found himself in a world filled with huge lotus flowers. He didn't recognise it.

"Who's memories are these, then…," Riku muttered, swinging the Soul Eater down on Heartless. No matter what the deal with these memories is, if the Heartless—the darkness—was going to follow Riku around, defeating it was all that was left. If he couldn't win against his own darkness, there was no future in sight for Riku. Riku ran, ran, ran.

<<ЯR>>

In the marble hall, empty of people, Donald looked around nervously. "I thought Riku would be waiting here for us again, but…"

"He's not here, is he. Maybe he lost the urge to fight Sora?" Goofy continued. He and Donald gave Sora a worried look. So far Riku had been lying in wait for them each time they'd left a world, but this time he wasn't there.

"I hope so, anyway…," Sora said, as if to himself, brows drawn.

Three shadowy figures watched the scene in a crystal ball. Larxene raised a prettily shaped eyebrow, and glared at Vexen. "What's going on, Vexen? 'Riku' is meant to listen to you, but where is he? What's he doing?"

Axel was grinning beside her. "He's hiding on purpose, to draw Sora in, see. So you better get that ball rolling," Axel said to Larxene before looking at Vexen.

Right now, Riku—no, the Replica—must be wandering the worlds. Axel smiled to himself, knowing all his plans were going well.

"I'm soooo sorry. I just get so confused, never knowing whether Vexen's research is worthless or not~"

"Silence!" Vexen was shaking slightly with rage.

"Aww… the truth hurts, doesn't it? Didn't ever think you were so naïve~"

"Let me give you a piece of my mind—"

The fights that break out between those two are always so predictable. Here we

go—the star of the show has appeared.

“Stop, now.”

Marluxia had appeared between Larxene and Vexen, breaking them apart. He was the one in charge of this castle. Axel glanced at the man, and folded his arms. Naminé, only just visible in the corner of his eye, dropped her eyes like a cornered little animal. He could see her trembling.

“Vexen, the truth is, your operation has ended with failure. Do not disappoint us again.”

For a moment, Vexen’s pale face flushed red, as if his vigour had returned. “Disappoint you—get off your high horse! You are Number 11 of our Organisation. I am Number 4, and not about to take orders from the likes of you!” Vexen yelled, looking as if he’d grab Marluxia in rage at any moment.

“However, this castle, and Naminé, were entrusted to me. In this place, opposing me is treason against the Organisation.”

Larxene laughed as if Marluxia’s words were unbearably funny. “Traitors are destroyed. Those are the rules~”

That’s right—Traitors are simply destroyed. Those are the Organisation’s rules.

“In the name of the Organisation, I declare your operations a failure. I’ll report your blunder to the Superior for you.”

The Superior—a man who once had a different name, and different memories. He’s the true fake. The man who stole the name Ansem—

“Hey—wait! You can forgive such a small thing—such a small thing, surely!”

Marluxia grinned at Vexen’s begging. “Under one condition,” he said, quietly.

Vexen looked up. “Condition?”

“Destroy Sora by your own hand.”

“What?!”

As he faked surprise at the order fired upon Vexen, on the edge of his vision, Axel noticed Naminé's shoulders shaking.

<<ЯR>>

On the other side of the door was a world with a beautiful sunset.

"Where am I…?" Blinking his eyes against the dazzle of the setting sun, the Replica looked around. "Can I really get stronger… in a place like this?" The place was filled with a terribly calm atmosphere. *In this castle people take back their lost memoires—that's what they said, but I don't recognise this place at all. Compared to the dark despair filling my heart, the atmosphere in this town is so warm.*

The Replica began to walk casually. There was no sign of Heartless in the town. Suddenly, the air wavered.

"Huh?"

A blond-haired boy tore past the Replica on a skateboard. He didn't seem to notice the Replica.

"Wait!"

The boy rode his skateboard along the sloping road, and the Replica chased after, until he came to a wide space, a plaza. It was dotted with shops. But, there wasn't a human to be seen. The Replica sighed, and began to walk through the plaza.

"What the hell was that…"

He couldn't see the blond boy anywhere, as if he'd been an illusion.

The Replica began to wander the town dyed in sunset. As he went on, he came to a deserted corner on the outskirts of town. There he found a large hole in a part of the wall.

"…Wonder if there's something through here," he muttered, and drew nearer to the hole.

<<ЯR>>

Finally getting out of the lotus forest, Riku came face to face with a giant Heartless—Trick Master. Without even flinching, Riku threw all his force into a jump and brought the Soul Eater down on the Trick Master's arm.

"—All these—Heartless—," Riku said as he landed, angry at himself, and the Trick Master's arm hit Riku at the same time. Sent flying, Riku just managed to grab the ground with the tips of his fingers. In the same fluid motion Riku kicked off the wall and slashed out at the Trick Master again. His fingernails were broken up from the friction against the ground.

I don't care—I have to defeat it. So I can see Sora again—So I can put an end to my own darkness.

<<ЯR>>

Ducking through the hole, the Replica found himself in a dark forest. He began to walk slowly, looking all around. A melancholy atmosphere dominated the forest. The Replica thought it was exactly like the inside of his own heart.

Why couldn't I win against Sora—why do I want to fight Sora? Because Naminé hates him, that's why. If Naminé never wants to see Sora again, then I have to stop Sora. It should be a simple reason. But then why is my heart so horribly gloomy… The Replica clenched his fist around Naminé's charm in his pocket. *I definitely made a promise to Naminé. That's not a lie… So, I have to defeat Sora.*

Far off, he could see bright sunlight. Trying to sever his anxiety, the Replica broke into a run. He ran until—he stood before a huge mansion.

"…Sora?" There, he could see Sora and Vexen facing off. It seemed the two of them hadn't noticed the Replica's presence yet. They were yelling about something.

"What, you're here too, are you—Riku."

The Replica turned at the sudden voice from behind. Standing there was Axel. "What the hell are you trying to pull—Hey, you said I'd get stronger if I came here—"

Axel grinned. “Did I say something like that?”

“Did you trick me?”

“No, nothing like that—just watch, Riku.”

The Replica turned, and Sora and Vexen began to fight. With the aid of his companions, Sora was definitely doing Vexen some damage.

“He’s definitely a strong one, isn’t he?”

The Replica watched Sora in silence. *Sora’s strong, yes… But.*

“I don’t care about that! Turn Riku back to normal!” Sora yelled, poking his Keyblade into Vexen.

“Aw hell. If I don’t get going soon, things are going to get nasty,” Axel said, almost to himself.

“Back to normal? You fool… you don’t understand a thing. There’s nothing left for that Riku but to sink into the nothingness of darkness.”

Vexen’s words shook the Replica. *What…? I’ll sink into the nothingness of darkness…?*

“Haha, wasn’t counting on that,” Axel laughed, as if it was no big deal.

“What do you mean?”

Axel grinned. “You go on ahead—I have to clean things up here.”

The moment Axel said so—the Replica’s body was wrapped in light.

“What?!” The next instant, the Replica was standing in the usual huge hall. “What just…” *What the hell just happened? I have no idea. The nothingness of darkness? And what is that Axel guy plotting? What should I do? My head is—splitting.*

I hate Sora!

Naminé definitely said so. Wait, did she really? My memories are getting fuzzier

and fuzzier. The one thing I know for sure—is that I am to protect Naminé from Sora. That's why I have to defeat Sora. I have to protect Naminé. The Replica repeated it to himself over and over, and then—he felt someone coming. It was Sora and his friends.

Sora walked right past the Replica without noticing him. "Sora… If you keep going, you'll hurt Naminé," the Replica said to Sora's back. The Replica had begun to believe in this as the truth. That there couldn't be any other truth.

Sora spun around. "You still want to fight me? But Vexen, that guy who was controlling you, is gone!" he shouted.

The Replica frowned for a moment. *Vexen was controlling me?* But—his feelings for Naminé erased all doubt. *Yeah—I promised Naminé.* "I'm stopping you, to protect Naminé. That's my heart," said the Replica slowly, readying his blade.

"Why can't we protect her together!"

There's no way Sora and I could ever protect her together. Because—Naminé hates Sora. "I'm the one who protects Naminé! I promised her I would since forever ago!" the Replica yelled.

Promise me.

I promise.

That night, we—we definitely made a promise. "When we were little, one night heaps of shooting stars came falling down. Naminé was scared, asking what we'd do if a star fell on the island, so I told her. I said, even if a star falls down here, I'll protect you, Naminé—"

"That's—just like Sora's story!" Goofy yelled, cutting through the Replica's story.

"What do you mean?"

"But… But I made a promise to Naminé then. On the night of the shooting stars, to protect her!"

Sora's insisting that his memory is the same as mine. "Don't lie! You weren't even there then!" the Replica shouted. That night—it was just the two of us. Sora wasn't by my side.

"Riku, you're the one that wasn't there! I even have a charm that Naminé gave me that night!"

"A charm…?"

"See!" Sora pulled a charm out from somewhere near his chest, and it was—exactly the same as the one the Replica had.

"Why do you have that—Oh, I see…" The Replica closed in on Sora, blade still readied.

"Riku…?"

"That thing is a fake! The real one belongs to me!" the Replica shouted, pulling out his own charm.

"Wha—what is this!"

"I'll destroy that fake!" The Replica jumped, lashing out at Sora.

"Wah!" Sora just managed to stop the Replica's attack with his Keyblade.

"It's not a fake! I got this from Naminé!" Sora shouted, too.

Trying to repel Sora's words, the Replica pushed Sora back. "Mine is real!"

But…

"My pendant is the real one!" The Keyblade caught his blade forcefully, and the Replica was sent flying.

"—Ugh!" He stood, panting heavily. *Why—can't I win? Why—do we have the same memory? Is this the nothingness of darkness I'm falling into—?* Doubt after doubt began to spin through his mind.

"Riku!" Sora shouted, but—the Replica ran away, rejecting him. The Replica didn't notice the pendant tumble from his pocket.

<<ЯR>>

In a dark room in the castle basement—Lexaeus appeared in front of Zexion. It seemed he was coming back from having been out.

“What’s wrong, Lexaeus?” Zexion asked.

For a second, the expression showing on Lexaeus’ face was one of displeasure mingled with fear. Then, he said in a calm tone, “Vexen was annihilated.”

“Yes, I sniffed out as much. The scent of Axel destroying Vexen’s existence. For fellow Organisation members to do such a thing—It is deplorable.”

I can’t read from Zexion’s expression whether—he means this from the heart or not.

The lights of the dim room were the only things shining on them.

“Sora’s the problem. He was powerful enough to defeat Vexen, and he’s still under Naminé’s control. Soon enough he’ll be Marluxia’s puppet,” said Lexaeus, and he looked down.

However, Zexion pressed him further. “In that case, what do we do? Do we destroy Sora before he falls into Marluxia’s hands?”

Destroy Sora—Lexaeus slowly widened his eyes. “That won’t be necessary. If Marluxia is to gain the light that is Sora, then we will take the darkness.”

“…You mean, Riku?” Zexion said. Lexaeus nodded, and disappeared.

<<ЯR>>

In a corner of the room with the huge crystal ball, Naminé sat on a chair with her eyes lowered. R*ight about now—Sora will be heading to that island. I’m on that island—and, Sora will let go of the last fragment of memory.*

“Naminé.” Naminé looked up at the call. Axel was standing there. She always had a strange sense that this man of the “Organisation” was out of place. “You’re all he has left,” he said quietly. Naminé looked down again.

That's what I rearranged his memories for. But I can't do anything now.

"You're the only one who can save him." Naminé looked up. She didn't really understand what Axel was trying to say. "Do I need to say it again? You're the only one who can save him."

"But… it's too late," Naminé replied in a small voice. *Everything is already in motion—and it's all too late.*

"It's too early to say that, isn't it?" Axel moved closer to Naminé, and looked right into her face. "Hey, Naminé. Did you notice? Marluxia isn't here right now."

"What are you saying…"

Axel grinned. "I'm saying, there's no one here who'd stop you."

That's—in other words, you won't stop me? Naminé stood up slowly.

"Don't screw it up."

Naminé gave a small nod, and flew out of the room. Axel watched her go.

"…Heh heh heh…," he laughed. "Hahahahahah. It's finally getting interesting. The battle's all set up." Axel walked casually over to the crystal ball, and watched the image of Sora shown in it. "So then… Sora! Naminé! Riku! Marluxia! Larxene! This clash better be one hell of a show; I wanna enjoy this, okay?" he said, with a smile, touching the crystal ball.

In it appeared—the Replica. "…And you are the last trigger to pull—Fake," murmured Axel, watching the Replica run through hallways inside the crystal ball.

<<ЯR>>

Naminé raced down the castle's stairs. *Sora should be in that white room by now. If I don't hurry—I won't get there in time.*

That instant, Naminé ran into something.

“Ah—” Naminé took a defensive stance, thinking it was an Organisation member, but it was the Replica.

“…Naminé!” he yelled, face sheet-white. Naminé’s shoulders trembled.

“…Riku… No… Replica…,” Naminé said in a small voice, but it didn’t reach the Replica.

The Replica was shouting. “Hey, Naminé! You told me you hated Sora, so—You told me you didn’t want to see Sora, so—so I thought I’d protect you, and—but, Naminé… he had the same pendant as me, and… What is this?! Naminé!” He clutched his head.

“…I…” Naminé looked down for a moment, then gazed straight at the Replica. “I’m sorry,” she said, in a small voice.

The Replica grabbed her shoulder forcefully. “Sorry—what do you—”

“I created your memories,” said Naminé, slowly and clearly. “Yours are fake ones. No. Sora’s memories are fake, too. See, I am a witch… who can manipulate memories.”

“My memories are… Sora’s memories are fake?”

“I created his and your memories by connecting chains of memories. And your memories are fakes I made by linking the chains of Riku’s memories—and then I simply filled them into a doll that Vexen built.” The Replica sank down to sit on the floor, like Naminé’s words had sapped all his strength. “I’m sorry… I made a mistake… Which is why I have to go.”

The Replica buried his face in his hands. “What do you mean! Tell me, Naminé!” he shouted. Naminé moved away from him. Naminé turned her back on the Replica and broke into a run.“Wait! Naminé!” Naminé kept running without even turning back at the sound of his voice. “Naminé—!” The Replica’s shout didn’t reach anyone.

<<ЯR>>

The hall he’d finally reached was filled with a horrible smell. The sign of the wavering presence made Riku stop stock still, readying the Soul Eater. “I can tell

from that stink. You're a 'nobody' too, aren't you."

A figure appeared at Riku's words; Lexaeus. "I am Lexaeus. You live up to your reputation, don't you, Riku. You've done well to get this far. Excellent. But for someone this powerful to be afraid of the darkness… what a waste."

Riku frowned. "I'm not… scared," he said, almost to himself. "I'm—"

"I can tell," Lexaeus interrupted in an easy tone. "You could control the darkness. Discard the weakness of being afraid of it, open your heart and seize the darkness."

"What if I said no?" was Riku's reply, a question filled with impatience. *I have no need for the strength to take and gain the power of darkness. I want to be strong—with my own strength, nothing more.*

Lexaeus smiled for a moment, then he readied a huge axe-like blade. "You'll lose both your darkness and your light, and disappear here!" he shouted, and in that instant, a huge dark power shot out of him. It was powerful enough to remind Riku of Ansem.

The impact made Riku shake. "Urgh?!"

"This is the power of darkness! The owner of a weak heart who is afraid of the dark will not defeat me. Now, give up! Open your heart to the darkness!"

"I refuse!"

Riku swung the Soul Eater up over his head and charged at Lexaeus. "I'm—not afraid of the dark!"

"Hah! Liar! You'll get stronger and stronger—and if you don't accept that darkness, you—will break!"

Lexaeus' blade sent Riku crashing into the floor, impact shattering it, lumps of marble scattering. Lexaeus shattered one in his fist. "Ugh—-!" Riku jumped, avoiding the shards flying at him, over Lexaeus' head and behind him, twisting his body just before landing and slashing at Lexaeus' back.

"Come on!" he shouted, dealing a long barrage of damage to Lexaeus. But.

“Not quite!” This time Lexeaus threw his weapon at Riku. It bounded off the floor and up at Riku, causing him to grunt and fall to his knees.

“…I… won’t lose to someone like you… won’t lose to something like darkness!”

Staying bent low, Riku shot out for Lexaeus’ chest, cutting up with the Soul Eater. “Nugh… such power…” Lexaeus slumped to his knees. Riku jumped back, trying to keep distance between them, his breathing roughly.

“What’s wrong… Lexaeus…,” he called, panting harshly. I can defeat you… without using the power of darkness. “Darkness… isn’t all it’s cracked up… to be. I… win.”

Lexaeus smirked. “Huh… I’ve lost, no other way about it. But don’t underestimate me! The darkness that will come forth when I perish will swallow you whole!”

In the next instant, an even bigger impact than the darkness that had shot out at the start of the battle attacked Riku once again. “Wh—what!” Powerful darkness surrounded him. Finally, the darkness wrapped around him, and he couldn’t see a thing.

“Hahahahaha! This is the power of the Organisation’s No. 5… of I, who was once that man’s beloved disciple!” With those final words, Lexaeus’ body, too—was wrapped in darkness, and faded away.

This is—darkness. Darkness, stretching out forever and ever on every side… Riku stood there, alone. “What… happened to me…,” he muttered, looking around. “Where am I…?”

“I can see…,” a voice whispered. “I can see…”

“Lexaeus?!” Riku yelled.

“Riku…,” the voice rang in his ears, sounding like a sneer. “I can see your heart…”

“No, you’re wrong! This strong stink of darkness… You can’t be?!”

“Yes… Remember… Let me rise up in your thoughts, your heart…”

Riku remembered this presence—the smell. This smell… yes. “Ansem!” Riku yelled. It was the name of the darkness that had nested inside him.

“Heh heh heh heh… Riku… You called my name. You’re… thinking about me, aren’t you…”

The voice made chills rip down Riku’s spine. *That memory—I never wanted to remember. The awful feeling the moment Ansem took over my body…*

“You’re afraid… of my darkness, aren’t you… That’s good… The more you think of me, the closer my restoration becomes… and when I finally awaken… I will… take your heart and…”

Riku found himself shrinking back. *The darkness feels like it’s crowding in on me, closer and closer. The darkness—is after my heart.*

“Control it!” Riku heard, and in that instant, the man was standing right before him.

That man—Ansem. Riku couldn’t move, felt like his whole body was turning to ice under that cold stare. *How can I escape from the darkness? How can I escape from Ansem?* Ansem’s gaze—pierced through Riku.

“Riku, no! Don’t let Ansem take you!” came a second voice from somewhere, and a beam of light shot straight at Riku.

“That voice—Your Majesty!” Riku yelled, and the light surrounded him.

“You bastard King!” Ansem’s shout was drowned out by the light.

“Ugh…” Riku came to, and found himself lying in the hall. *I feel a bit unsteady—but I’m not injured anywhere.* “Your Majesty… did you protect me?” Riku muttered, slowly getting to his feet. “Your Majesty! Where are you? Please, answer me!”

He searched the hall desperately, but the King’s figure was nowhere to be seen. He couldn’t hear his voice, either. “You’re by my side, aren’t you… Your Majesty…” Riku clenched his fists against his chest, and a small call rang out.

Riku, you're not alone.

With the feeling that he'd heard the King's voice from somewhere—Riku finally started walking again.

<<ЯR>>

It's a lie… There's no way my memories are fake! She lied! The Replica ran after Naminé, who had already disappeared. *I have to make Naminé take back what she said. And I have to protect her from Sora. Sora's memories are the fakes…* He opened a door to find many halls. In the middle stood Naminé and Sora, talking about something. *I have to protect Naminé from Sora…*

"That's because, Sora, I went into your memory and—"

At that moment, the Replica shouted out. "How about I explain!"

"Riku!" Sora yelled, surprised.

"It's so simple. Your memories are nonsense. It was never you who was meant to protect Naminé, it was me, but you came barging in! You're manipulated by fake thoughts, Sora!" The Replica ran at Sora's chest, and swung his blade down.

"Stop!" Naminé screamed, but her voice no longer reached the Replica. Sora inhaled sharply, blocking the Replica's attack with his Keyblade.

"I'm the one who protects Naminé!" the Replica yelled, springing back, distancing himself, then swinging his blade down at Sora again.

"Just stop! Riku!" Trying to tear himself away from her scream, the Replica sent Sora flying back. "Sora!" Naminé screamed.

"Ugh… Riku…" Sora tried to stagger to his feet as the Replica slowly walked towards him.

"I win." The Replica brought his blade up over Sora's head.

"Riku, you can't!" Naminé screamed. But the Replica swung his blade down at Sora.

“Disappear, fake!”

“Stop!” Naminé screamed, and the whole area was wrapped in light.

The Replica’s vision misted over. He made a small noise. His vision rolled. There was no strength left in his legs.

Promise me.

Naminé’s voice sounded far away.

“Riku…?”

He could hear Sora calling him.

But… I don’t understand. I’m…?

“Riku! Riku!”

Sora’s voice is so far away… I hate you. So why would you call my name out like that?

Just as if he were sinking, the Replica let go of the last of his consciousness.

<<ЯR>>

Continue to Chapter 7: Rejection

Chapter 7: Rejection

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<<ЯR>>

“First Vexen, now even Lexaeus gone… What is happening to the Organisation…,” Zexion murmured in a small voice.

With perfect timing, the air in the room quivered in answer.

Zexion looked up at the presence, and the one entering his field of vision was someone he’d thought was upstairs, Axel.

“And Naminé’s turned traitor and made Sora destroy Larxene, to boot. I wonder who’s next,” Axel said, grinning as he walked towards Zexion.

Zexion frowned in a displeased manner. “…Maybe you,” he said, without looking at Axel.

“Me? Nah,” Axel replied unexpectedly, folding his arms. “Just now, I faked a hard loss to Sora and ran. He won’t be fighting me for a while.”

For a while, Axel said, and the word caught in Zexion’s mind, but he held his tongue without asking what he meant.

“I’d say it’s Marluxia who’s next to go,” Axel said, a faint smile playing on his lips.

“Sora beat you, so Marluxia mustn’t have a chance. That’s how it is, is it?”

Of course, though Marluxia was the one entrusted with this castle, he’s only Number 11. Not that the numbers represent the order of age or strength, but Axel is both Number 8 and close with ‘him’, and from his point of view, Marluxia must seem beneath him in rank.

“It’s just fitting for Marluxia, who was going to use Sora to rebel against the Organisation, to be destroyed by Sora’s own hand,” Axel said, as if concluding the matter, but Zexion opened his mouth to urge him on.

“So then—we no longer have a reason to get hold of Riku, do we.”

“You mean you want him disposed of. You’d go head to head with someone who defeated Lexeaus?”

Of course, the chance of me fighting and defeating Riku is low. He has beaten Lexaeus, who was famous for competing for first or second strongest amongst the Organisation members when it came to battle strength.

Understandably, Zexion had no intention whatsoever of fighting Riku head-on.

"My way is different," Zexion answered, a slight smile ghosting across his expressionless face.

<<ЯR>>

I'm sorry… Riku.

Sinking in deep, deep darkness, the Replica clearly heard a voice.

I'm not Riku—but, I'm happy for Naminé to call me that, he thought vaguely inside his own dark consciousness. We definitely made a promise, didn't we? On the night of the shooting stars, I promised I'd protect you, Naminé.

You are a sin I'm responsible for—and the punishment.

Don't say a thing like that, the Replica wanted to scream. But he couldn't. Because he thought it would hurt Naminé.

I hope my prayers reach you, somehow…

Light shone on the Replica's body. It was the light of Naminé's prayer.

"This place is…," the Replica heard himself say, and he forced himself back to consciousness. He was in the huge hall he'd passed out in.

"…Naminé…?"

I was so sure Naminé was calling out to me. But, she's not here.

"What… happened to me?"

All I know is that I'm not Riku. That I'm a fake, created to imitate him. But—that's okay.

Right now, only one feeling occupied the Replica's heart.

I want to protect Naminé—That was the Replica's wish.

The Replica ran—heading for Naminé.

<<ЯR>>

“Then we’ll all just pool together our memories and make new ones!”

He could see Sora yelling at Marluxia and Naminé. *If that were possible, how happy I’d be…*

“You seem to have forgotten,” Marluxia snorted. “If Naminé uses her powers to erase your memories, you’ll be an empty shell! You’ll lose the heart you think and feel with! Just like that pitiful fake Riku!”

Riku charged at Marluxia’s chest. *I haven’t lost the heart I feel things with, the heart I think of people with!*

“I don’t know about that,” the Replica said in a calm tone, and swung his blade down. Marluxia was sent flying to his knees by the unexpected blow.

“Ugh—You?!”

“Riku!”

Sora came running over, but the Replica didn’t turn around. “No. I’m just a fake.”

And then, the Replica stabbed his blade at Marluxia.

“An empty shell! You should have lost everything! Why?!” Marluxia spat. But the Replica answered clearly.

“My body and my heart are fake. I never had anything to lose, right from the start. But I have memories I don’t want to lose! Even if they are lies! I don’t care if the promise was an illusion. I protect Naminé!”

It was the only true thing out of all the fake feelings that made up the Replica. Naminé quietly watched the Replica.

“Riku…!”

Sora stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Replica, facing Marluxia and readying

his Keyblade in the same way.

“You…!” Marluxia stood, slowly. “You’d tie down your own heart with chains of memories born from lies? You’d throw away your heart’s freedom!”

No, that’s not right, thought the Replica. *I was able to wake up again because my memories—I have memories I don’t want to lose. It doesn’t mean I’m throwing away my heart’s freedom. It just means I’ve chosen the memories that are there in that place. I was able to choose because my heart is free.*

Pale pink petals fluttered around Sora and Riku.

“You turn your back on the truth because your heart is weak… In that case, you’re not a worthy adversary for me! Give it up!”

A huge scythe appeared from the petals, and swung down at Sora and the Replica, who planted his foot one step ahead of Sora’s and blocked the attack with a grunt.

“Go, Sora!” he yelled.

Sora took his word and made a great leap, swinging the Keyblade down from above Marluxia’s head. Marluxia thrust the Replica aside to block Sora’s attack with his scythe.

“—Not yet!” he spat.

Sora landed, then jumped again, shouting “Donald, Goofy!”

With perfect timing, Donald shot magic at Marluxia.

“Firaga!” Donald incanted, and at almost the exact same time, Donald charged at Marluxia. That instant, a storm of petals filled the area around Marluxia before finally spreading out.

“Look out!”

The Replica scooped Naminé up on instinct, jumping out of the storm.

“…Riku…,” said Naminé, looking up at him from his arms with an expression

like she was about to cry.

“I’m not Riku—,” the Replica said in a low voice, putting Naminé down in the shadow of a pillar. In the centre of the huge hall, Sora and his friends were sent flying by Marluxia’s attack.

“…Thank you, Replica,” said Naminé. Her words reached his back as he ran at Marluxia again, bringing his blade down. But, his attack was batted aside by the huge scythe.

“After all this, Replica… Your attacks are worthless!”

Marluxia swung his hand down, and once again the hall was filled with pale pink petals. Straightening back up, the Replica escaped for the shadow of the pillar. He panted hard, waiting for the storm to pass.

“I can’t even land a hit on him—!” Donald yelled.

“Calm down—there has to be a way,” the Replica said to him. Threading his way through a gap in the storm, he ran at Marluxia. “Sora, let’s go,” he yelled.

“Huh—” Sora said, sounding hesitant.

The Replica turned to him. “It’s okay, come on!” he shouted again.

“Got it!”

Sora broke into a run, chasing the Replica to Marluxia. Marluxia swung his scythe down at them, just as if he’d been waiting for them—but the Replica blocked it.

“What?!” Marluxia yelled in surprise as he found himself stopped.

Quick as a flash, the Replica shouted, “Jump, Sora—!”

Sora jumped, and swung the Keyblade down from above Marluxia’s head.

It may be impossible alone, but—if it’s the two of us—no, the four of us together, we can definitely defeat him. Because in this moment, short as it may be—we’re friends.

Just as Sora's attack was about to hit Marluxia, Sora yelled, "Donald—magic, now!"

"Yeah—Firaga!" Donald shot out magic.

"Goofy, over here!" the Replica added.

Following his voice, Goofy charged at Marluxia. Marluxia batted Sora's attack aside, then swung his scythe to try and avoid Donald's fireball, and in that unguarded moment, Goofy barged into him with full force.

"Guh—!" Marluxia choked, and he shuddered all over.

"Sora, come on!"

Sora and the Replica both jumped.

Their two blades swung down at Marluxia in-synch. The instant the Replica felt the impact vibrate in his hand, Marluxia's body became a mass of petals—which fell down all around.

Goofy peered worriedly into Sora's face. "Did we… get him?"

"…I think so," Sora replied. He turned to the Replica, holding out his right hand.

Feeling sort of shy, the Replica high-fived that extended palm.

Donald leapt into the air. "We did it!"

"Our memories should come back now, right?" Goofy said, smiling, as he turned to where Naminé had been hidden in the shadow of the pillar.

Naminé appeared before them, shaking her head. "No—not yet."

"That's right—what you destroyed was no more than a dummy of me."

Petals gathered before a huge door deeper into the room—into the shape of a person, and then they became Marluxia.

"So what!" the Replica yelled, running at Marluxia, and swinging his blade down. But, Marluxia's body turned into petals again, which scattered to the floor.

“That one’s a fake too, huh,” the Replica said, chagrined. A card fluttered to the ground in front of him.

Sora picked up the card. “…So I guess the real one’s back there?” he asked, turning to Naminé.

“…Yes.” Naminé gave a little nod.

“That’d be right. I can feel a really strong power. Like it’s gonna explode any minute,” Sora said.

“Then we’ve gotta do something before it explodes,” said Goofy, no less carefree than usual.

“Let’s go, Sora!” said Donald. He swung his staff about impatiently.

“Yeah—,” said Sora, turning to Naminé and the Replica. “Riku, take care of Naminé,” he said with a smile of complete and utter trust.

Unable to bear it any longer, the Replica averted his eyes from Sora. “…Me?”

I’m no one—no, I’m a fake, memories and existence and all, I’m what’s before you become someone. But Sora talks to me like I’ve been his friend for a long, long time.

This pained the Replica.

“You can’t?” Sora laughed, like he’d been teasing.

“…Okay then.”

The Replica, who’d kept his eyes off Sora, turned around to see Naminé give a small nod and show a smile. He nodded back, as if answering.

“…Don’t forget your promise,” Naminé said to Sora, and the Replica’s chest ached.

Sora nodded sharply. “I know—I’ll keep my promise, no matter what.”

“Sora, let’s go!”

And then, Sora's little group of three held the card up to the door.

<<ЯR>>

I have no idea what's going on behind the door. All I can tell is that massive powers are clashing.

The Replica and Naminé watched the door in silence.

"Sora will be okay, won't he," Naminé murmured in a small voice.

The Replica turned to her. "Sora's your hero, isn't he? If he promised you, then there's no way he'll lose," he said.

"…Riku, you're so kind," Naminé said, smiling shyly.

I remember that smile—it's the same smile she had when she gave me the charm, thought the Replica, sadly. *That memory, these feelings, all of it is fake…*

Not wanting to see that smile of Naminé's any more, the Replica turned his back on her.

"Thank you, Riku… no. Thank you, Riku Replica," she said to his back.

The Replica stared into the empty air without answering.

<<ЯR>>

As he went to progress to the next floor, Riku was hit by a huge impact. The castle shook as if it were roaring.

"What?" Riku heard himself say, but the shaking settled quickly back into its original quiet. Riku checked his surroundings, then realised a certain fact.

"One smell—a strong power—has vanished…?" he muttered, then someone called out to him.

"The master of this castle, Marluxia, has fallen under the hand of the Keyblade hero," said a man who'd suddenly appeared, as he moved closer to Riku.

"Keyblade… You mean Sora! Sora's here?!" Riku pressed, and the man blinked

in surprise.

“Oh. Do you want to see him? Or should I say… can you see him?”

“What do you mean?” Riku asked back, in a harsh tone.

“Even now, inside your heart darkness—yes, Ansem’s shadow, dwells. Aren’t you ashamed to see Sora in your condition?”

Riku’s eyes dropped. Back then—Riku should have beaten Ansem. But, the stench of darkness still hung around him.

“Sora is a hero who battles the darkness. It’s his destiny to oppose you, with that darkness dwelling in your heart. If you don’t want to believe me—you’ll have to make sure of the truth with your own eyes.”

The man threw Riku a card, which he caught. Depicted on the card was blue ocean, a little island, and a coconut tree.

“This card, it’s our…”

“Yes, your home. So now, go, to make sure of the truth,” said the man—Zexion—and he disappeared right before Riku’s eyes.

“…Destiny Islands…,” Riku muttered, the name of the islands familiar on his lips as he stared at the card.

<<ЯR>>

Sora, who had defeated Marluxia, smiled with Naminé. The Replica watched them, feeling vague and fuzzy.

“Are you okay, Riku?” Sora suddenly called out, and the Replica looked at him, surprised.

The Replica shook his head, and looked down. “I’m not Riku. I’m a fake. I can’t remember when or where or why I was born. The only things left that haven’t faded away are you and Naminé—those memories are lies too, though.”

“Hey, Naminé. Isn’t there some way to put Riku’s memories back the way they

were?” Goofy asked Naminé.

But, Naminé looked down too, her face clouding over. “That’s…”

He was a Replica created from nothing, originally. Putting his memories back to normal would mean erasing everything.

“I don’t care. It’s fine.”

The Replica turned his back on Sora and the others, and started walking.

I don’t know what to do. Or what I want to do.

“Wait!”

The Replica’s feet stopped moving at the sound of Sora’s voice.

“Fake or not, that doesn’t matter anymore! You’re here now, and you have a heart that belongs to you and no-one else. Your memories belong to you and you only, so treasure them!”

Sora’s words were gentle.

The Replica held back the tears that were threatening to spill over. “Sora, you’re very kind,” he said, back still turned. “Even a fake like me can see how real your feelings are… that’s good enough for me.”

Right now, Sora’s feelings are good enough for me, the Replica thought. *The fact that I met Sora is good enough for me.*

“Riku!” Sora yelled, but the Replica didn’t answer. He broke into a run, like he was escaping.

<<ЯR>>

This body—these feelings—it’s fake. And—from the bottom of my heart, I’m jealous of the real Riku. The Riku who’s friends with Sora. The Riku who has the power of true darkness. Even the darkness surrounding me is fake.

“Hey, Riku.”

The Replica looked up.

"…Axel."

"Hey, don't you wanna be the real thing?" Axel asked, grinning.

Be the real thing—I do want to, if I can.

The Replica gave a quiet nod to Axel's question.

<<ЯR>>

Standing on a beach, Riku felt the breeze from the sea. *I've ran here, rolled around with Sora here, so many times. I didn't think this breeze could feel so nostalgic. But back then, I couldn't wait to get off this island. Back then I thought the sound of waves was so monotonous, but now it feels terribly gentle.*

Riku noticed some human shapes, and ran towards them.

"Hey!", he called. Standing there was Wakka, Selphie and Tidus. But, they didn't move at all.

"What's wrong with you guys. Has to be the first time I've seen the three of you this silent," Riku said, but they simply stared at him. "Is there something on my face?" Riku asked, shrugging, and in that instant—the three of them vanished like phantoms.

The hand that Riku had been reaching out unconsciously clenched into a fist, and Riku hung his head. Maleficent's words rang in his heart.

Your heart is stained with darkness.

And so, you won't be able to meet anyone but creatures of the darkness like myself.

That's—a lie.

Riku ran across the beach, heading for the usual pier.

I just know that Kairi and Sora will be waiting there for me. There's no way that darkness would be staining that place…

Riku crossed the beach, jumped up onto the roof of the shack, and ran over the usual pier.

At the end of his line of vision, Kairi was standing there, smiling—or so she should have been.

“Kairi…”

Kairi stood there, staring silently at Riku, just like Wakka and the others had.

“Hey, Kairi. You…,” Riku went to say, and in that instant, Kairi vanished. In her place appeared the man who had given Riku the card earlier—Zexion.

“You really should have known that this was going to happen,” Zexion began, almost admonishingly. “Before arriving here, you travelled through many of the worlds of your memories. However, I’m sure all you met were beings of darkness. See, there’s nothing left in your heart but dark memories. The memories of your home—have vanished.”

“You’re lying! I remember everyone from the islands just fine! Tidus, Selphie, and Wakka too! Kairi! Sora! Everyone—My… my… important friends…”

Riku clenched his fists and looked down.

“And who was it who threw those friends away? Did you forget your own actions? You destroyed your own home!” Zexion shouted, and in that instant, darkness wrapped around them—and rain began to beat down on Riku. Thunder echoed in the sky—and then the world began to crumble away.

“The island where you were born, where you grew up, tore apart, crumbled away, and many hearts vanished into the darkness. It was your fault!”

Yes—if I hadn’t been so easily tempted—if I hadn’t believed his words—

“The one who got sick of the small-island lifestyle, thoughtlessly opened the door to darkness and destroyed the islands was you! You were tempted by the darkness. And now, you are a complete resident of the darkness.”

No, you’re wrong, Riku wanted to yell, but he couldn’t even do that. He sat down where he was.

On the bridge before him he could see a reflection of himself from that night.

What was I thinking while I looked out over the black stained ocean that night—What was I thinking? I can't remember.

He sneered at himself. The other self turned around and grinned.

"See, your own true form!" Zexion shouted, and in that instant, the other Riku standing right in front of him was wrapped in a dreadful darkness—and changed into a huge, pitch black human-shaped shadow—a darkside.

"This is… this is… my true form…?"

The shadow beat it's fist down at Riku. Riku didn't even dodge, and was sent flying.

"This is… my true form…"

I don't know who I really am.

Clenching his fists, Riku looked up, and just then he saw something glimmer with light in front of him.

"Huh…"

It was the light that shot from a Keyblade. And, standing over there was the Keyblade hero, Sora.

"Sora?!" he yelled, standing up.

Sora slashed at him.

"Stop, Sora! Don't you recognise me?!" Riku shouted desperately, blocking Sora's Keyblade.

"I'm fighting you because I recognise you! I can see your true form!"

Sora sent Riku flying back with one blow.

"Gah!?"

But I can't see that huge shadow anywhere—was it really me, all along?

"Look at you, pained by the power of light—You really have become a creature of the darkness, haven't you. You're not Riku any more, you're a tool of the darkness…," said Sora, disappointedly, as he readied his Keyblade. "I get it—I'll make you understand the power of light!"

Light shot from Sora. Riku was blown away by a power with the same terrible impact as the darkness, and it wrapped around his body.

"Am I… fading… fading under the power of light…"

If I am darkness—and If I can't fight the darkness with my own strength—I guess being destroyed by Sora is the only way, Riku thought in the depths of his fading consciousness. *If I have to be defeated, I'm happy for it to be Sora.*

You won't fade.

A girl's voice resounded from somewhere.

You won't fade.

You won't lose against any power.

"…Huh?"

Someone was squeezing Riku's hand. The light was too strong, and he couldn't see who it was very well.

"You won't lose against the light… or the darkness. So don't be afraid of the light—and don't be scared of the dark. Both together with be your strength, you see," said the girl in the light, and she helped Riku stand.

"My strength… Darkness, too?"

"Yeah, a power that's all your own. The darkness that has grown in your heart is very big and deep, but—if you can gaze straight into it without being afraid of that darkness, nothing will scare you ever again."

The light began to mellow, and the figure that surfaced looked like Kairi, and

also like someone else.

“Even with it dwelling in your heart, have the courage not to lose to the darkness. That will be an irreplaceable power only you can ever have. Even at the bottom of lightless darkness, even in the most dazzling, over-strong light where you can’t see a thing, the darkness will guide you. To where your important friends are.”

Riku nodded sharply, and asked, “…Will I be able to see them?”

My important friends—Sora, Kairi, all the others.

“Don’t you want to?” the girl’s voice asked, sounding as if she were smiling.

“That’s not what I mean, of course I do. Which is why I’ll go! With my own power… the power of darkness!” Riku yelled, holding the Soul Eater up to the heavens. “Darkness!”

That moment, darkness shot from the Soul Eater. The light that surrounded him melted away—and Zexion’s figure appeared.

Riku turned to that shadow, and swung his Soul Eater down.

“W-what?! But how could you tell where I—in all that light…?”

Zexion fell to his knees.

“You stink of the darkness… I could sense it clearly, even in the light. I guess you could say the darkness guided me,” Riku said, and Zexion stood unsteadily.

“Ugh… No matter how you struggle, you truly are a creature of darkness after all.”

“Who cares. I am me,” Riku said, and he thrust the point of the Soul Eater against Zexion’s throat.

Even if the power of darkness is nesting inside my heart, it doesn’t change the fact that I am me. And if I can’t make the stink of darkness fade away, then I should just use that power for myself.

“What’s with the sudden attitude change? Up until now you’ve been afraid of the darkness—”

“Not anymore!”

Riku swung the Soul Eater down from above Zexion once more.

“Gah… You little—!”

Zexion pulled the hood of his robe up over his head, and vanished.

“Ran away, did you…,” Riku muttered, and then light began to patter down from inside the dark clouds above his head.

And then, what poured down was the gentle Destiny Islands sunshine…

Riku ran, to face his own darkness.

<<ЯR>>

Barely making it to the room in which his comrades had once gathered, Zexion fell to his knees, panting harshly.

“What… what is with that guy! Until now, no one has ever taken in that much darkness! It shouldn’t be po…!”

Zexion beat his fists against the floor. This behaviour was unusual for Zexion to show. One person-shaped shadow watched over Zexion.

“Wha—Riku!?”

Zexion shrank back unconsciously, as ‘Riku’ looked down at him expressionlessly. Behind him stood Axel.

“O-oh. That’s the Replica that Vexen made, isn’t it. I see, perhaps he can defeat Riku if they face each other… Axel?” said Zexion, sounding clingy, and the Replica kept looking down at him expressionlessly.

“Hey, Riku—you know all too well how fake you are, don’t you. Do you wanna be the real thing?” Axel asked, and the Replica turned to him slowly.

“Yeah.” The Replica nodded quietly.

Yeah—he wants to be the real thing—he wants to be Riku.

“Well then, it’s simple. You should get yourself some power that the real Riku doesn’t have. If you do that, you can be something real—not Riku, not a fake of anything, but a new existence,” Axel said, grinning.

“Axel! What are you saying!” Zexion shrank back even further along the ground.

“Look, there’s some perfect ‘feed’ right over there,” said Axel, nodding his chin towards Zexion.

“What kind of idiotic thing are you…!” Zexion yelled, not even trying to hide his panic. But Axel ignored Zexion’s cry, putting an arm around the Replica’s shoulder and beaming at him.

“My bad, Zexion. Watching over Sora and Riku looks a lot more fun than helping you.”

“Stay… stay back!” appealed Zexion, moving back even more, and the Replica turned to him, swinging his blade down. “Stop—!”

Zexion’s scream disappeared, swallowed by darkness.

<<ЯR>>

Continue to [Chapter 8: Revive]

Chapter 8: Revive

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<<ЯR>>

Riku walked through the great hall, on his way to the next world.

I'm not scared of the darkness any more—there's darkness, there's light, and there's me the way I am now.

Riku understood.

"Riku—Riku…," called a voice from somewhere.

Riku stopped walking and looked around. "Who's there?!"

That voice is familiar. So is this smell.

"I'm sure you felt it. Me, dwelling in your heart. You opened your heart to the darkness, Riku." The voice was coming from inside—the whisper of Ansem. "Yes… your heart will become all-consuming darkness itself."

"I'm different from then!" Riku yelled.

From then—from when I lost in the battle against Sora, when I couldn't accept that truth. I'm different in every way. Ansem's tempting doesn't make my heart tremble at all.

"Is that so?" Ansem shot back challengingly, and in that moment—Riku's body floated up into the air.

"My body…?!"

“As your darkness deepens, my power is brought back along with it. Manipulating your body is easy,” Ansem said, and at the same time, Riku found he couldn’t make his body move at all.

“Dammit…,” Riku managed to grind out, and that instant, a white sphere of light floated down to Riku.

“Nugh!” Ansem grunted.

The white light circled round and round Riku, and shot a strong beam of light. That instant, Riku plonked to the ground on his ass.

“You again…!”

Riku felt the smell of Ansem start to fade from the surroundings. He could already move his body freely.

“Gosh… I’m glad I got here in time. I think this will stop Ansem moving for a while,” came a voice from the white sphere of light, and right before Riku’s eyes it formed the shape of a person—and became the King. “I’m sorry I ran so late, Riku.”

The King looked at Riku, who still just sat there on the ground in disbelief.

“…Your Majesty… it’s you,” he voiced.

“Yep,” the King answered. Riku stood slowly, an uneasy expression on his face, and he reached out and touched the King.

“Wah?!” the King yelled. Riku kept touching him all the same. Being able to touch him properly made Riku happier than anything else. He pulled the King into a hug.

“What are you doing? Are you trying to tickle me?” he laughed, twisting around.

“Haha… I can really touch you this time. You really came to help me,” said Riku, releasing the King, only to sink weakly to the floor.

“I promised I’d come to you no matter what, didn’t I?” the King said clearly, looking at Riku.

“Ah, yeah… Sorry, I’m fine. I’m just so relieved. I’ve been alone for so long, and now I’m not, it’s like… I don’t know… warm, I guess.”

The King’s body was warm. It’s been so terribly long since I’ve been with anyone —my heart is beating like crazy.

Riku stood up slowly. “But how did you get here?” he asked, smiling shyly. “You were so far away.”

“A card guided me.” The King took out a card. “I was searching for a path in the Realm of Darkness, when all of a sudden, this card came to me—when I picked it up, I could see your heart beyond the darkness. And then I got here.”

“This card…?”

Riku took the card from the King, and stared at it. A huge clock tower and a train were depicted on it. He’d never seen scenery like that before.

“The card probably wanted to come to you.”

“…Maybe,” Riku said, quietly, and he and the King exchanged glances.

The King’s face turned a little grim. “Well then, let’s go, Riku.”

“Yeah. Got it.”

Riku climbed the stairs, and held the card up before the door.

<<ЯR>>

The setting sun shone beautifully on the neat rows of brick houses. Unlike the towns up until now, this place seemed filled with a gentle atmosphere.

“What is this place? I don’t remember it at all,” Riku said, looking out at a view he’d never set eyes on before as he turned to the King he knew was following behind him. “Your Majesty, do you know anything about it?”

But, the King wasn’t there.

“Your Majesty?”

Riku looked around, but the King's figure was nowhere to be seen.

"The king is not here," echoed a voice, and Riku turned.

Standing there was Ansem. Riku readied his Soul Eater reflexively.

"You will fight alone. Against my power of darkness!" Ansem shouted. But, Riku just quietly lowered the arm he'd raised. "What's wrong, giving up? Will you submit to the control of I, Ansem?" he provoked.

Riku shook his head. "…You're not Ansem. You smell different."

Ansem narrowed his eyes slightly.

"The Ansem in my heart gives off a very powerful smell of darkness. But, you smell different. Not like darkness… like something else." Riku took a deep breath, and stared at the person that was taking the form of Ansem. *This smell—is not the smell of darkness. It's another smell—kinder, right. It's familiar.* "I finally got it. You were the one who guided me in the beginning, weren't you. You appeared pretending to be Ansem, and gave me the card. To make me fight the darkness."

"That's correct," Ansem said, and something like fog wrapped around them.

The fog slowly cleared—and standing there was a man. His whole face was covered in something like red bandages, which made his expression hard to tell.

From a gap in the bandages, a single eye stared right at Riku.

"Call me DiZ. I've been watching you for a long time." His voice was deep and calm.

"Who… are you. What do you want to make me do?" Riku asked, and DiZ crossed his arms.

"I want to make you choose."

"Choose?" Riku returned.

"You are a special being. You stand right in the middle of darkness and light…

in the twilight. Which is why you must meet Naminé and choose."

He'd never heard that name before. "Naminé? Who's that?"

"You'll know when you meet her," said DiZ, and he disappeared once more.

"Hey, wait!" Riku dashed over, but—the man's figure was gone. Riku couldn't even sense his smell.

"Naminé, did he say…?"

Riku looked down for a moment—then he slowly raised his head, and started walking.

There was no-one in the town. There weren't any Heartless, either. But the empty town didn't have an atmosphere like it was deserted, it felt warm somehow.

What a weird place, thought Riku.

In the wall surrounding the town was a large hole. Riku could smell something on the other side of it.

A slight smell of darkness—and something else. Is that the smell of Naminé…?

Passing through the hole, Riku found himself in a gloomy forest. He could see a light far away.

Riku broke into a run.

<<ЯR>>

The Replica ran.

The town of twilight that Axel had guided him to was somewhat familiar. *This was where Vexen and Sora had fought. And—this is probably where Vexen fell.*

Axel said that if I defeated Zexion, I'd get new power. That even if I can't be the real thing, if I get new power, I can be something other than a fake of someone.

Really? Is that really true? I don't know.

*Even with this new power, my heart still feels empty inside, the same as before. Nothing's changed—If change is even possible, then it' might be after I've defeated the real thing,*thought the Replica. *If I defeat the real thing—will something change?*

The Replica passed through the hole on the edge of town—and ran through the gloomy forest.

Axel said I can meet Riku if I go to where Vexen died.

If I meet Riku—if I fight Riku, maybe something will change.

<<ЯR>>

The setting sun shone on huge gates. A white mansion could be seen on the other side of them.

"…Is this where Naminé is?" Riku muttered, lowly.

Someone called out from behind him. "Don't wait up or anything."

Riku turned to find, staring right at him, the fake version of himself—the Riku Replica. The Replica was breathing hard as if it had run there.

"…You've changed, haven't you. Last time we met, you were afraid of your own darkness, but now…," the Replica said, slowly readying his blade.

"How do you know," Riku asked, not bothering to ready his own Soul Eater.

"Because I'm you," said the Replica, closing the gap between them very slightly.

"I'm me," Riku returned, and the Replica stopped moving—and laughed a little.

"I'm me…? Makes me jealous, wish I was the real thing. That's a line a fake like me could never get away with."

The Replica made a huge leap, slashing out at Riku, who inhaled sharply, barely blocking the attack.

He's strong—much, much stronger than the last time we fought.

“You might be a fake, but you’re going pretty hard at it!” He pushed with force and the Replica went flying back, but he span in the air, regaining his balance before he landed.

“Yeah,” he shouted as he stood up, “A fake—that’s me! My look, my memories, my feelings, everything! Even this new power!” A dark aura began to rise from him.

It was evil—and it smelled familiar to Riku. It smelled like the man Riku had been fighting just recently at Destiny Islands.

“I took that guy—Zexion’s—power for myself. But…!”

The Replica jumped again, bringing his blade down. The impact hit Riku through the Soul Eater with a bang. The face before him was exactly the same as his own. But, Riku thought, it was also different somehow.

“I thought if I got a new power I could be someone else, not just a fake of you! But nothing changed… I’m still so empty!” the Replica shouted, and he pushed their locked-together weapons until Riku was sent flying back.

Riku hit the gates, and slowly slumped to the ground.

“Everything of mine is borrowed. As long as you exist, I’m permanently your shadow!” the Replica yelled, panting as he thrust his blade at Riku.

“…So what. I’m me. I’m not just gonna sit there and let you do me in!” Riku deflected the Replica’s blade with his Soul Eater before lunging to grab at the Replica’s waist, pushing him down.

Riku pushed the point of the Soul Eater into the Replica’s throat.

“Are you gonna… destroy me?”

“If it’s gonna go on like this then… yes.”

“Huh—I’m not afraid of being destroyed. I’m just a fake after all,” said the Replica, expressionlessly. *I’m not scared to be destroyed. I’m scared of what I’ll forget. And—of being forgotten. Sora will remember me, won’t he? Or will I get muddled up with his memories of the real thing, and be forgotten?* “I don’t have

a real heart. Even what I'm feeling right now is probably a lie."

The Replica smiled just a little, and light began to wrap around his body.

"What are you feeling?" Riku asked, looking down at the Replica.

"Once I've been destroyed, where will my heart go? I wonder if it will fade away," the Replica replied, staring up at the sky.

The sky in this town is beautiful and red. I'm glad this is the last thing I'll ever see, thought the Replica.

"…Where, I wonder. Probably the same place as mine."

The Replica's mouth twisted into a smile at Riku's words.

"Tch… Am I a copy of the real thing right down to that? …Well, whatever," said the Replica. His voice was gentle and calm.

Then his body was wrapped in light, and he disappeared.

Riku picked up the Soul Eater from where it had fallen on the ground, and turned to look behind himself. The gates opened as if they were greeting him. Stepping slowly, Riku began to walk.

<<ЯR>

It was dusky inside the mansion. Riku couldn't sense or smell the presence of anyone.

"Is this really the place…?"

Riku climbed some stairs from the hall to a second floor, and entered a room deep at the end of a corridor. The room was white, resemblant of those marble halls. There was no-one here, either. Riku stared at a piece of paper that was stuck to the wall. Sora and Riku's smiling faces were drawn there on what looked like white paper torn from a sketchbook.

"Who drew this…?"

Riku reached out and touched the picture, and that instant, light shot from it.

“…What?!”

Riku was wrapped in light—and when he came to, he was standing in a white room that overflowed with that same light. Before him stood a girl with blonde hair, watching him quietly.

“Are you Naminé?”

“Yes,” Naminé replied, smiling slightly. Her voice and smell were familiar to Riku.

On Destiny Islands, when I was about to be swallowed by the darkness, the girl’s voice that called out to me, and the smell—there’s no doubt that they belong to her, Naminé.

“…Oh. So it was you,” Riku muttered.

For a moment, Naminé gave him a weird look. “Huh?”

“No, nothing,” Riku answered.

Naminé tilted her head just a little, and said, “Um… please come this way.”

Beyond Naminé lay a huge device shaped like a flower bud. And inside, was Sora.

“If it isn’t Sora! What have you done to him!” Riku ran over to the giant device without thinking.

“It’s okay,” called Naminé, gently. “He’s just sleeping. It’s to bring back his memories.”

“Explain it to me.”

Naminé nodded, and began to slowly speak of all the things that had happened to Sora in this castle.

<<ЯR>

Naminé, having finished Sora’s story, gazed levelly at Riku.

Sora lost his memories here in this castle—and gained new ones. And he chose to throw those memories away again, and return to the way he was before he entered the castle. That's everything Naminé told me.

"So Sora chose to go back to the way he was…," Riku murmured, looking up at Sora.

"There's a choice I'd like you to make, too," Naminé said to his back. Riku turned.

"I didn't have my memories stolen like Sora did."

"Not your memories. This is about the darkness."

"About the darkness…?" The moment Riku put that to words, he felt the smell of darkness in the air around them get heavy for a second.

"Where there's darkness in your heart, Ansem dwells. He's sealed up right now, but when he finally awakens, he'll control you like he did before. That's why you should use my power. With my power, I can put a lock on your heart. If I do, Ansem won't be able to leave your heart."

Riku looked back up at Sora. "What will happen to me, if you put a lock on my heart. Will I forget, like Sora?"

Naminé didn't answer.

"I'll forget, won't I."

"The memories would be sealed away inside your heart along with the darkness. You won't even be able to remember the darkness. You'll go back to the way you were, long ago. But you're the one who decides. Riku… please choose."

Riku, still looking up at Sora, smiled a little.

"That Sora… Look at his face. Not a care in the world… Will I sleep like that?"

"Yeah."

Sora's sleeping face was peaceful. Riku blew out a small sigh, then turned to

Naminé again.

“This guy has done everything to suit himself since way back. Every time we do anything together he slacks off. Take the raft we built to leave the island. I was the only one who worked seriously on it.”

Riku closed his eyes, remembering Destiny Islands.

You’re mad too, right, Riku?

The stupid look on Sora’s face when Kairi turned and said that to him. Just remembering it makes laugher bubble up inside me.

“I’ve decided,” said Riku, opening his eyes. “I’m gonna chew this kid out once he wakes up. I told him to ‘take care of Kairi for me,’ so I’m gonna ask him why’s he here sleeping without a care in the world? But that wouldn’t look very good if I go sleeping too. I don’t need a lock on my heart. I’d rather fight Ansem than rely on something like that.”

“But, if you’re swallowed by the darkness that Ansem manipulates…,” Naminé said, a doubtful look on her face.

But, Riku didn’t have any more doubts. “If it does, then the darkness will guide me.”

Naminé grinned. “…So it will.”

“It’s like you knew what my answer would be, from the start.”

“I didn’t know. I just hoped. I wanted you to stand up against the darkness. Because you have the strength to do it,” Naminé said, clasping her hands in front of herself. Seeing it, Riku shrugged.

“So that’s why you helped me in that light. In Kairi’s form.”

“You noticed?!” Naminé said, shocked, and Riku smiled.

“I felt it when I met you. You smell the same as Kairi.”

Yeah—what I felt coming from Naminé was Kairi’s presence. I don’t know why

Naminé smells like Kairi, but I don't need to know right now, thought Riku.

Then, Riku reached out his right hand to Naminé.

"Huh…?"

Riku took Naminé's right hand in silence, and squeezed.

"Take care of Sora for me."

"Uh-huh, I know… let's promise." She squeezed Riku's hand back.

"Yeah, it's a promise."

Riku looked up at the sleeping Sora once more.

Sora—let's meet again.

<<ЯR>

On the other side of the door Naminé had guided him into opening, the King was waiting.

The King met Riku with a smile. "I see… You went with not sleeping after all."

"How did you know?"

"DiZ told me," said the King, turning to look at DiZ standing behind him. DiZ just stood there with his arms folded.

"Your Majesty… Have you met DiZ?"

The King tilted his head. "…I don't know. It almost feels like I've met him before, but not…"

Riku walked over to DiZ. "Hey, who are you?" he asked.

"I'm nobody, and I can be anyone. You choose whether you trust me or not," DiZ said in a low voice.

"You seem to like making other people choose things," Riku provoked, but DiZ

simply continued to speak without showing a hint of reaction.

“Your choice to reject sleep is the choice to confront Ansem.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Riku said, and he could see DiZ’s slight smile through his bandages.

“Isn’t it the road you chose? I’m only here to watch.”

“You don’t like talking clearly, do you. Which meaning are we going with? Are you here to support me, or here to abandon me?” Riku asked, sounding displeased.

“That too is your choice. Believe in whichever meaning you choose.”

Believe… Riku stared at DiZ. *That was something I couldn’t do, before I listened to Naminé borrowing Kairi’s form, and before I met the King.*

Believe, Riku.

The light won’t abandon you, no way.

Even if you’re in the depths of darkness, the light will reach you!

The King told me so from the start. But I could believe in his words. Now, I wonder if it’s the one thing I couldn’t do that Sora could. Now—it’s okay. I can believe in the King, in my own power, heart, light and darkness.

DiZ threw a card over to Riku. “This is a card that will draw the darkness inside your heart out into this world. Finish this matter with Ansem.”

“So if I use this, Ansem will come out.”

DiZ disappeared without answering.

“Hey—?!”

Riku tried to chase after.

“Let’s fight, put our powers together,” called the King.

Riku turned slowly. “I’m sorry. I’ll fight alone.”

“Why?” the King asked with a surprised look.

“If I don’t settle this with my own strength, it’ll be meaningless,” Riku said, squeezing his Soul Eater. “Instead, I have a favour to ask you. If I lose to Ansem, he’ll use me as his tool. If that happens, Your Majesty, you have to use your power to destr—”

“Of course! I’ll save you no matter what,” the King interrupted.

“Huh? No, I want you to destroy Ansem along with—”

“No, no, no! I’ve already chosen. I’ll help you no matter what. I’m not going to change my mind. Or maybe you don’t believe me,” the King said, grinning.

“That’s my choice. I believe you, Your Majesty.

“I believe, too. That there’s no way you’ll lose, that is.”

“Yeah.”

If the King says so, then I know I won’t lose. I can definitely beat Ansem.

Riku nodded firmly, then held the card up to the door.

<<ЯR>

On the other side of the door, the smell of darkness—the smell of Ansem hung everywhere.

“Come on out, Ansem. I can smell you,” said Riku, and Ansem’s form slowly became definite.

Ansem laughed loudly. “You’ve shown me your power. It was a wonderful battle, you commanding the power of darkness,” he said, looking down at Riku.

“So what.”

“Still, I don’t understand. You’ve accepted the darkness, so why defy me? You and I are very alike. Both of us walk with the darkness to guide us. Yes… we

exist the same, so why? Somewhere in your heart, are you still afraid of the darkness?"

"No. I just hate the smell of you," Riku answered, readying his Soul Eater. *I know that when I load up my strength, darkness overflows from me. But I'm not scared of that any more. Because, I just have to believe in my own strength.*

"So you've chosen to fight… how foolish. I controlled you once. You should know the strength of my darkness."

A huge shadow stood up behind Ansem. *That is darkness itself—the darkness nesting in Ansem's heart—no, perhaps it is Ansem's heart.*

The huge shadow, which could even be seen as a giant Heartless, took a human shape, and looming over Riku.

"Yeah, I know. Did you forget? Even with all your power back then I still couldn't beat Sora. Your power isn't exactly top shelf," Riku said, running at Ansem.

"Very well. Then sink into my darkness!" Ansem yelled, as if he'd been preparing for Riku's move. That instant, the shadow behind Ansem swung its' fist down at Riku.

"…Ugh!"

Riku stopped the shadow's attack with his Soul Eater. It had dreadful strength.

But—it's okay. The King believes in me. And, I believe in myself.

"Let's go!"

Riku thrust the attack aside, and jumped up over Ansem's head. But the shadow planted itself there to protect Ansem, and Riku was sent flying back.

"I'm not afraid of such insignificant power as yours!"

"…Really?" Riku grinned, and darkness billowed from him. "I command the power of darkness. You—are just bound by it!"

Riku charged at Ansem.

“Graaaahhhhhhh”

The shadow swung its’ fist down in front of Riku. But, Riku jumped over the fist, and swung his Soul Eater from up above Ansem’s head.

“You!”

The instant the Soul Eater hit Ansem’s body, a dark impact overcame Riku. Trying to avoid the impact, Riku blocked out his field of vision with both hands, and landed on the ground.

Riku had to have done a great deal of damage with that one blow. He got up from his crouch on the ground and ran at Ansem in one fluid move, swinging the Soul Eater from side to side.

“Ansem! It’s over…!”

“It’s… not… over!” Ansem yelled, even as he fell to his knees.

“I won’t lose to you—I won’t lose to the darkness!” Riku yelled, turning around, and Ansem also turned to Riku at the same time with a grin.

“I… gave you… your darkness… my shadow… fades… someday… someday… I’ll return!”

As Ansem’s body began to fade away, darkness itself shot out.

“Wha—?!”

The whole area was suddenly wrapped in darkness.

That moment, a ball of light appeared in the air above Riku’s head.

“…Your Majesty?!”

“You said you’d ‘fight alone’. But, you wouldn’t mind this much help, right?” echoed the King’s voice. And then, a strong light shot from the ball of light. “Let’s go, Riku.”

And with those words—everything was wrapped in light.

“Did I… win?”

They were back in the great hall. Riku looked around.

“You won, Riku,” came the King’s gentle voice.

“But…” *I can still feel Ansem’s smell around me.*

“Hey, Riku. What are you going to do now? Are you going home?”

“…I don’t know. I can feel it. It’s very faint, but his smell…” Riku lowered his eyes a little, turning to the King. “I can’t go home until it’s gone. Maybe I’m still bound by his darkness.”

“Your darkness belongs to you. Just like your light, right?” said the King, and Riku looked up. The King continued, powerfully. “Up until now, I always thought that the darkness was something that shouldn’t exist. But, being with you has made me change how I think. Maybe the road you’ve chosen, Riku—light and darkness back to back—will lead to possibilities meeting in a form no-one’s ever seen. I want to try and see what’s at the end of that road, too. I want to walk there with you.”

No-one’s ever said anything like that to me before. That they want to walk with me—that’s.

“For you to say such a thing to me, Your Majesty, geez, I’m embarrassed.”

“And you’re making me embarrassed, calling me ‘Your Majesty’,” said the King with a smile, but Riku still scratched his head awkwardly.

“Got it—Mickey.”

At Riku’s words, the King—Mickey Mouse—gave a sharp nod.

<<ЯR>>

Continue to [Epilogue—DAYBREAK OF START & THE LAST EVENING —]

Epilogue: Daybreak of Start & the Last Evening

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<<ЯR>>

As far as the eye could see were grassy plains and one road that continued on and on. They didn't know how long the road went. But, Riku and Mickey walked it. The two of them were clad in black robes. It was the same clothing as worn by those in the 'Organisation'.

Far ahead, they could see that the road split into a crossroads. Standing in the middle of it waited a man—DiZ.

"What are you going to make me choose this time?" Riku asked.

"The road to light—or the road to darkness?" said DiZ, looking at the road that spread to the left, and the road that spread to the right.

"Neither. I choose between light and dark," said Riku, and he walked past DiZ, down the road that lay between the road to light and the road to darkness.

"The road of twilight leading to moonless night…?" said DiZ.

Riku turned. "No," he said, and then he smiled a little. "…The road to dawn."

He started walking again, and Mickey ran after him.

Ahead of the two of them lay—the road of daybreak, the road of dawn.

And, a new journey began.

<<ЯR>>

Walking a road without you

To re-make a forgotten promise once again

To meet you where you wait ahead

<<ЯR>>

A boy watched the sun sink. He always watched from the clock tower right above the train station, but something seemed different about this one. *It's almost like something is about to change*, the boy thought, vaguely.

"Roxas…!" he heard Pence call from underneath the clock tower.

"I'm coming!" Roxas answered, turning his back on the sunset, and dashing down the clock tower.

The setting sun—shone on Roxas' back.

<<Reverse/Rebirth>> END

Kingdom Hearts Chain of Memories: <Reverse/Rebirth>Riku's Story finished! The story continues in Kingdom Hearts II: Roxas—Seven Days.